

MEDICAL ERRORS: THE REAL CRISIS

Medical errors waste billions and kill thousands

In their landmark 1999 report, *To Err Is Human*, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) estimated that the annual cost of preventable medical error is between \$17 billion and \$29 billion.¹ Despite some improvements following the study, not enough has been done to curb the epidemic of medical error; studies show billions of dollars are wasted each year and thousands of lives needlessly are lost. For example:

- **Institute of Medicine study concludes medication errors cost over \$3.5 billion annually.** In its 2006 report, *Preventing Medication Errors*, the IOM concluded that preventable medication errors cost hospitals \$3.5 billion annually.²
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates hospital patients contract 250,000 infections yearly from catheters alone.** These infections are estimated to kill between 12-25 percent of patients who get them and cost about \$25,000 each to treat.³
- **Central line-associated infections cost almost \$30,000 per patient.** Researchers at Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh, PA, found that it cost the hospital, on average, an extra \$26,839 to treat each patient who contracted central line-

associated bloodstream infections.⁴

- **Pennsylvania hospitals lose over \$150,000 per patient with hospital-acquired infection.** A survey by the Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council found that the average hospital cost for patients with hospital-acquired infections was \$185,260. Patients without infections cost only \$31,389 – a difference of over \$150,000.⁵
- **Medical errors cost Illinois \$1.5 billion annually.** In July 2006, Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich signed an executive order creating a new Division of Patient Safety to reduce the enormous cost of medical errors, which cost Illinois \$1.5 billion a year.⁶
- **Medical errors cost thousands of lives each year.** In its 1999 report, the IOM determined that medical errors cause between 48,000 and 98,000 patient deaths each year.⁷ Tom Baker, an expert in medical malpractice liability, has found that:

“One very clear conclusion emerges from the research on medical malpractice and medical malpractice lawsuits: The real medical malpractice problem is medical malpractice. It is not pretty to say, but doctors

*and nurses make preventable mistakes that kill more people in the United States every year than workplace and automobile accidents combined.”*⁸

⁹ Id., at 29-30.

¹⁰ Eisenbrey, Ross. “Tort costs and the economy: Myths, exaggerations, and propaganda.” Economic Policy Institute, November 20, 2006; Baker, Tom. The Medical Malpractice Myth. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. p. 9.

- **Medical errors cause needless pain and suffering for thousands of innocent patients and their families.** Baker found that *one in every 100* hospitalized patients becomes a victim of medical error.⁹
- **Medical errors are the factor driving up health care costs, *not* medical malpractice premiums.** Medical malpractice liability costs account for less than one percent of all health care spending.¹⁰

¹ Kohn, Linda T., Corrigan, Janet, M., and Donaldson, Molla S. To Err is Human: Building a Safer Health System. Washington D.C.: National Academy of Sciences: 2000.

² Committee on Identifying and Preventing Medication Errors, Board on Health Care Services Preventing Medication Errors. Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 2006. p. 5. The IOM found that there are at least 1.5 million preventable errors, adding \$3.5 billion in costs to the health care system. Id.

³ Kowalczyk, Liz. “State seeks to cut hospital-acquired infection rates.” Boston Globe. January 11, 2007. A small study in Massachusetts revealed that 13 percent of 1,953 cardiac bypass patients suffered infections at the site of surgery. Id.

⁴ Lee, Christopher. “Studies: Hospitals Could Do More to Avoid Infections.” The Washington Post. November 21, 2006. pp. A3.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Office of the Governor of Illinois, “Governor signs Executive Order creating new Division of Patient Safety.” July 13, 2006.

⁷ Kohn, Linda T., Corrigan, Janet, M., and Donaldson, Molla S. To Err is Human: Building a Safer Health System. Washington D.C.: National Academy of Sciences: 2000.

⁸ Baker, Tom. The Medical Malpractice Myth. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. p. 157.