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

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

- **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.

- **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.

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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.*


5 *Id.*


9 *Id.*, at 29-30.