

Around Our Town...Legally Speaking

Tips to Avoid Medical Errors



by R. Michael Shickich

Preventable medical errors, which are caused when a health care provider either chooses an inappropriate treatment or chooses the appropriate treatment but executes it incorrectly, are conservatively estimated to injure 1.5 million people every year and to cost \$19.5 billion in additional treatment. In addition, errors related to medications harm 1.5 million people a year and cost another \$3.5 billion to treat.

So what can you do to reduce the chances that you will be the victim of such an error?

Communicate: The most important thing you can do is to communicate with your health care provider and to take an active role in your own health care. Ask questions.

Try to determine how familiar your doctor is with the treatment recommended or the medicine prescribed.

Make sure you know how to take your prescription drugs, including how often and whether with or without food or water, and what the possible side effects are. Do not make any assumptions, and if you don't understand what you are told, ask again.

It is also important to remember that communication is a two way street. Describe in detail all of your symptoms to your health care provider.

Be sure to tell him or her everything you may be taking—not just your other prescription drugs, but also over the counter medicines, vitamins, supplements, and even illegal drugs. Doctors need to have all the information to ensure that the treatment or drug prescribed is the right one for you.

Double Check: There is also nothing wrong with acting as a backstop for your medical provider. For example, when the doctor writes out a prescription, make sure you can read it. We have all heard the jokes about doctors' bad handwriting, so be proactive: If you cannot read the prescription, the pharmacist may not be able to either.

Before you leave, review the treatment



plan the doctor has given you. Studies show doctors tend to assume that patients understand a lot more of what they have been told than they actually do, and the time to clear up any confusion is before you go home.

Get Active: Take an active role in coordinating your health care. Put someone (usually your family physician) in charge of your overall care. This is especially important if you have multiple health care issues, which may affect one another in ways that are not fully understood.

If more than one provider is involved, make sure that they all have the same understanding of your treatment plan. If surgery is involved, it is very important that your doctor and your surgeon are "on the same page" about your condition and the

procedure to be performed.

Finally, visiting the doctor or hospital can be stressful. It is a good idea to ask a family member or trusted friend to be there with you as your advocate at your appointments, someone who can help you make sure all these things happen and even take notes on all that has been discussed.

Most of the time doctors, nurses, and pharmacists provide excellent medical care. However, all humans make mistakes. These commonsense tips can help you avoid those kinds of medical errors and prevent you from becoming a statistic.

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