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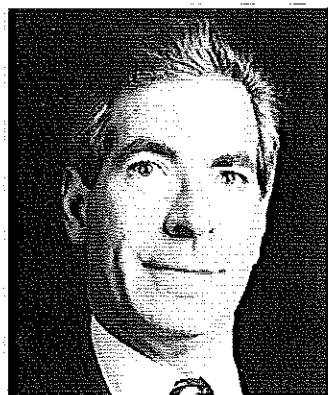


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Lost decade for patient safety

BY DAVID I. FALLK (GUEST COLUMNIST)
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Ten years ago, the Institute of Medicine shocked the nation with its groundbreaking report, "To Err Is Human," which revealed that preventable medical errors were killing up to 98,000 Americans a year. In sounding the alarm, the IOM called for immediate action.

Now, as the political debate over health care reform unfolds, a new report by Consumers Union, the nonprofit publisher of Consumer Reports, finds that virtually nothing has changed since the IOM revelation. In 1999, the IOM asked, "Must we wait another decade to be safe in our health care system?" The Consumers Union study sadly answers by stating, "Ten years later, we find ourselves asking the same question."

Instead of implementing the IOM's recommendations to make health care safer, the insurance and medical industries, and their political allies, spent the past decade deflecting public attention from their own failures by concentrating on ways to limit the legal rights of injured patients and their families through a variety of "tort reform" measures.

In effect, they misdiagnosed the problem and prescribed the wrong solution.

Among other things, the IOM suggested hospitals and other health care providers adopt computerized systems to prevent medication mistakes, which injure more than 1.5 million patients a year. By 2008, only 17 percent of American hospitals had put such systems into place.

The IOM also recommended higher standards for improvements and competency in patient safety for doctors, nurses and hospitals. While some progress has been made in that area, Consumers Union concluded, "There is no evidence to assure the public that physicians, nurses and other health care providers are any more competent in patient safety practices than they were 10 years ago."

In addition, the IOM recommended mandatory and public error reporting systems to encourage accountability - a recommendation that was vehemently opposed by the medical lobby. Today, only four states have public reporting of errors and half the states have no error-reporting systems at all.

The IOM suggested establishing a national center to track errors and measure progress on patient safety. Ten years later, there is no national center and "we are unable to tell if we are better off than we were a decade ago," Consumers Union said.

Instead, the health care industry remains wedded to a culture of secrecy that shields its mistakes behind closed doors. Both individual hospital "peer review" inquests and the only national error-reporting depository - the National Practitioner Databank - are off-limits to public scrutiny. A consumer can find out more about the used car they want to buy than the doctor who is proposing surgery or the hospital where the operation will take place.

For the most part, the health care industry and its political allies continue to push restrictions on patients' legal rights as the primary way to cure our nation's health care ills. While many conservatives support draconian limits on lawsuits, some idealists on the left have embraced less strident, but no less wrong-headed, approaches like specialty courts for malpractice cases and legal immunities for doctors who admit errors to their patients.

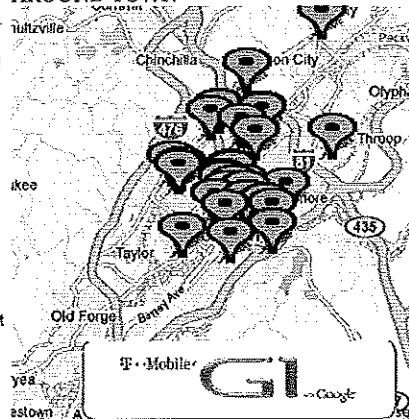
In Pennsylvania, our state's Patient Safety Authority has documented 8,645 "serious events" causing injury and death in hospitals across the commonwealth - a 19 percent increase over 2007. By contrast, there were only 1,602 malpractice lawsuits filed in the state, representing a 40 percent decrease in claims since 2002 and the sixth straight year of declining claims.

Patient safety issues are a serious and complex problem, but no problem can be solved without defining its scope. Our elected leaders can take a huge step forward in the push for health care reform by making full, public disclosure of medical errors a top priority. With such a system, legislators, health care providers and consumers can craft true reform. Effective policy, improved quality and an informed public, not tort reform, are the keys to safer health care.

We can't afford to wait another 10 years, or suffer another million lost lives. The time to act is now.

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