



FRANKLY SPOKEN

Guidance for implementation of patient rights

What patients can do to avoid medical errors

Ass. Prof. Dr. Stephan Kriwanek

The fact that unexpected treatment consequences can be anticipated in 5 to 10% of patients treated in hospitals has led to public concern. Based on American studies it is known that nearly half of these treatment consequences can be avoided and nearly a quarter are due to errors. Consequently, the perception that healthcare institutions largely work without errors fails to match reality.

Since the extent of iatrogenic damages has become known, the possibilities of modern error management in medicine have been discussed. Businesses with highest safety requirements such as aviation are used as an example.

The philosophy of a modern error culture implies that errors are not only to be considered as personal error performance but as a result of flaws in the system (motto; “It is not the people who are weak, but the systems they work in.”). Every reform is thus aimed at reducing the error rate of the systems (“latent errors“).

In this respect, the first measure is to create a basic understanding of the problem (“error awareness”) in all healthcare professionals as well as in patients. If it is recognized that many latent dangers are lurking in hospitals, the first important step toward changes has been made.

By developing an anonymous reporting system, hidden risks can be detected, analyzed and communicated before they cause damage.

By the application of modern information technologies errors in the transmission of medical data and the prescription of medical examinations and therapies can be avoided.

Imprint

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Communication problems play a major role in the development of unexpected treatment consequences. Experience from aviation has shown that the quality of communication can be effectively improved by adequate training (Crew Resource Management).

The learning curve for invasive procedures has to be put back as far as possible before application to patients. Hazards and risks of various measures have to be identified and described systematically and they should become part of the training whereby simulators can be used in some cases.

If errors have occurred, a structured analysis (Root Cause Analysis) has to be performed in order to be able to identify and combat all underlying causes.

A modern and effective error culture anticipates errors and is prepared for them. The primary objective is that no error should occur more than once.

In the past medicine was rather ineffective, inexpensive and more or less harmless, today it is effective, expensive and potentially hazardous. Therefore it is a very important task to render medical practices as safe as possible by the introduction of a modern error culture for patients, nursing staff and physicians.

Below please find some points that allow you to help increase safety in hospitals.

1. It is very important to find the right physician. When choosing a physician, get advice from your general practitioner who knows the local situation.

Take into account that the treatment of some diseases requires extensive experience and an adequate infrastructure and thus cannot be performed in every hospital. Get a second medical opinion, if you feel uncertain.

2. Use all possible sources of information on your condition and its treatment. If you search the internet for information, you should consider that there is no quality control on the internet. You should therefore only use sources which commit themselves to providing qualitatively safe data, such as e.g. patient advocacies, hospitals, chambers of physicians, professional associations or self-help groups.

Write down all the questions that are important to you and prepare yourself for the discussion with your treating physician.

3. Ask your doctor to inform you thoroughly on planned examinations and treatments. Ask for possible treatment alternatives and insist on data concerning efficacy and risks of different methods. Ask for exact explanation of the measures to be taken. Ask again, if something is unclear or information you deem important for you is missing. Thoroughly read all documents you have to sign and sign only, if you have no further questions.

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4. If you are in a hospital, behave in a way to ensure maximum safety.

Bring a list with you of all the medications you have to take regularly. Consent to any examination or treatment only if it has been identified and you understand, which measures have to be taken.

Ask for the results of examinations.

If diagnostic or therapeutic measures have to be taken, make sure that you exactly know what is going to be done.

Insist that your physician properly marks the body side to be treated in order to avoid wrong-side measures.

5. If you feel something does not proceed properly – particularly if unexpected problems occur – make yourself heard. Do not trust everything is alright or will improve all by itself. Many problems can easily be corrected at the beginning.

6. If a problem occurs, do not assume that an error has been made (only 25% of all unexpected treatment consequences are due to errors).

Ask your doctor to inform you thoroughly about the kind of problem and the planned treatment. Insist on getting information from the treating physician.

7. If you feel you have not been treated accurately, call for a discussion with the head of the department. If your concerns have still not been resolved, the next contact person is the medical director of the hospital. The ultimate resort to discuss the problem is the patient advocacy.

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