



SPECIAL FEATURE

Everyone Has a Responsibility for Patient Safety, Part I: The Patient's Role

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This article is the first installment in a three-part series on the roles patients, health care professionals and institutions play in patient safety in the health care process.

As the primary beneficiary of health care services (and the recipient of any medical error), patients also have the most vested interest in seeing their health care succeed. Patients can be a successful line of defense in protecting themselves (and you) against medical errors.

The days of a patient receiving care from a single general practitioner who supervised all facets a patient's health in a local practice or small regional hospital are practically gone. Medicine in the 21st century has provided today's health care providers and patients with a myriad of sophisticated, effective treatment options. However, inherent in these advanced, potent and complex interventions is the potential for systemic side effects, treatment interaction, complicated relationships and communication and technical failure.

Obviously, the care and well-being of the patient are the reasons for the existence of the health care system, as well as the objective and responsibility of health care providers. It is in everyone's best interest when the patient also participates as an active member of the health care team. A recent study supported by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) found that doctors often do not do enough to help their patients make informed decisions. Uninvolved and uninformed patients are less likely to accept the doctor's choice of treatment and less likely to do what they need to do to make the treatment work. As the primary beneficiary of health care services (and the recipient of any medical error), patients also have the most vested interest in seeing their health care succeed. Patients can be a successful line of defense in protecting themselves (and you)

against medical errors. Provided below are some ideas you can share with your patients to help them be active participants in their own care.

Encourage patients to be involved in their health care. The single most important way they can help prevent errors is to be an active member of the health care team.

Patients have a right to question anyone who is involved with their care. They need to understand that it is their body and life. They must be active participants in what happens. The goal of all medical treatment is to take the best possible care of them. Patient help in achieving this goal is mandatory. That means taking part in every decision about their health care. Research shows that patients who are more involved with their care tend to get better results.

Patients should make sure that all of their doctors know about everything they are taking. This includes prescription and over-the-counter medicine and dietary supplements such as vitamins and herbs.

At least once a year, patients should bring all their medicines and supplements with them to the doctor. "Brown bagging" their medicines can help them and you talk about them and find out if there are any problems. It can also help you keep their records up-to-date, which can help patients get better quality care.



Patients should be sure that when a doctor writes them a prescription, they can read it.

If a patient can't read a doctor's handwriting, the pharmacist might not be able to either.

Patients should ask for information about medication in terms they can understand—both when it is prescribed and when they receive it.

- What is the medicine for?
- How am I supposed to take it, and for how long?
- What side effects are likely? What do I do if they occur?
- Is this medicine safe to take with other medicines or dietary supplements I am taking?
- What food, drink or activities should I avoid while taking this medicine?

If patients have a choice, they should choose a hospital at which many patients have had the procedure or surgery they need.

If patients have more than one hospital to choose from, they should ask their doctor which one has the best care and results for their condition. Research shows that patients tend to have better results when they are treated in hospitals that have great deal of experience with their condition.

When being discharged from the hospital, patients should ask their doctor to explain the treatment plan they will use at home.

This includes learning about their medicines and finding out when they can begin their regular activities. They should also ask about follow-up care. Research shows that at discharge time, doctors think their patients understand more than they really do about what they should or should not do when they go home.

Patients should speak up if they have questions or concerns.

Patients should choose doctors who they feel comfortable talking to about their health and treatment. They can bring a relative or friend if it will help them to ask questions

Patient Safety Resources

Patient Resources

This article contains a sampling of the patient safety tips provided in the NASS patient education brochure, *Patient Safety: Tips to Help You Safeguard Your Health*. Brochures are available in sets of 25 for \$15.00 to NASS members and \$20 for nonmembers. To obtain an order form, visit the NASS Web site at www.spine.org or call NASS toll free at 877-SpineDr. In addition, patients can view the brochure on the patient section of the Web site at: <http://www.spine.org/articles/ptsafety.cfm>.

Ways You Can Help Your Family Prevent Medical Errors! Two patient information sheets (English and Spanish) are available from the Agency for Healthcare Research Quality show patients how they can prevent medical errors and are targeted to patients who read below the fifth-grade level. These are available for free at <http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/5tipseng/5tips.htm>.

Sources

20 Tips to Help Prevent Medical Errors. Patient Fact Sheet. Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) Publication no. 00-PO-38, February 2000. Available on the Internet at: <http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/20tips.htm>.

Five Steps to Safer Health Care. Patient Fact Sheet. Rockville, MD: Quality Interagency Coordination Task Force. January 2001. Available on the Internet at: <http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/5steps.htm>.

and understand answers. They should know it's okay to ask questions and expect answers they can understand. Patients have a right to question anyone who is involved with their care.

Patients should make sure that someone, such as their personal doctor, is in charge of their care.

This is especially important if they have many health problems or are in the hospital.

Patients should know that "more" is not always better.

It is a good idea for patients to find out why a test or treatment is needed and how it can help them. They may be better off without it.

If a patient has a test, they should not assume that no news is good news.

Patients should ask about results. They should find out when and how they will get the results of tests and procedures. If they do not get them when expected – in person, on the phone or in the mail – they shouldn't assume the results are fine. Call the doctor and ask for them. They should ask what the results mean for their care.

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Pamela M. Hayden also contributed to this article. Pamela is the Senior Manager of Scientific Affairs at the North American Spine Society.