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# DE BRUYN: Improving patient safety

By Irma De Bruyn

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NATICK - This is National Patient Safety Awareness Week. As a concerned health care consumers, I hope 2008 will be Patient Safety Year in Massachusetts.

Nearly every person I meet has a story of health care harm. It seems nearly everyone knows someone who has had something go wrong in the course of their care. Your uncle, grandmother, coworker. You.

The numbers behind these stories are staggering.

According to the Institute of Medicine, medical errors injure nearly one million Americans each year during their hospital stay and nearly 100,000 patients die as a result.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in five inpatient hospital admissions results in a hospital-acquired infection. A new study by the New England Healthcare Institute estimates one in every 10 Massachusetts patients suffers an avoidable medication mistake.

A study by HealthGrades found that failure to make a proper diagnosis was the most common cause of medical errors, with such failures affecting 155 of every 1,000 hospitalized patients.

Our health care is not as safe as it could be. Our health care providers are wonderful and are trying their best. Our health care system is complicated and fragmented. Errors happen because of systemic problems, and we need many systemic fixes to get the care we deserve.

Everybody has a role to play – hospitals, caregivers, payers, politicians, government, and consumers.

Consumers are on the front line of patient safety. Informed and empowered consumers can be the first line of defense against errors.

Armed with necessary information, patients and families can make good decisions and motivate providers to make improvements.

Last year, for the first time, Massachusetts consumers joined together to create a consumer voice for patient safety and quality improvement. The Consumer Health Quality Council, organized by Health Care For All, has identified needed improvements to fix our broken system.

Working with state Sen. Richard Moore and state Rep. Denise Provost, the council helped to draft "An Act Promoting Healthcare Transparency and Consumer / Provider Partnerships."

This bill requires public reporting of hospital infections and serious preventable medical errors, requires providers to disclose errors to patients, permits providers to apologize for errors without fear that the apologies would be used in a lawsuit, and ensures a patient voice in care through rapid response methods and patient councils.

Some of these improvements are already moving forward.

For example, this July, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health will begin collecting data on hospital-acquired infection. They will make some of this data public, and have set a goal to eliminate preventable infections in all our hospitals by 2012. The State's Quality and Cost Council plans public reporting on so-called never events – errors such as wrong-site surgery, wrong person surgery, and leaving objects inside a patient's body.

As of Oct. 1, Medicare will no longer reimburse hospitals for many preventable complications, and the Massachusetts Hospital Association is asking its member institutions not to bill patients for some of these errors.

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts has announced that it will require hospitals to fully install a computerized medication ordering system within four years or lose quality incentive payments.

Massachusetts is making remarkable progress in improving access for many of our uninsured residents. We believe quality improvement and cost control should be Phase Two of Massachusetts Health Reform.

Quality improvement and cost control cannot be separated. Medical errors cost the nation \$17 to \$29 billion each year. The tab is passed to consumers, employers, and government through higher health insurance premiums and direct care costs.

We can make 2008 the year when everyone's insurance card guarantees access to care that is safe, timely, effective, efficient, equitable, and patient-centered.. We need the voice and political will of the Massachusetts legislature to ensure that the message is delivered and heard.

Irma De Bruyn lives in Natick and is a member of the Consumer Health Quality Council.

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