

[Health](#)

Opinion: Seeking safety while seeking medical treatment

By Denise Provost and Dori Peleg

Mon Mar 10, 2008, 11:35 AM EDT

SOMERVILLE - This week is National Patient Safety Awareness Week. As concerned health care consumers, we hope 2008 will be Patient Safety Year in Massachusetts.

Too many people have stories of health care harm. It seems nearly everyone knows someone who has had something go wrong in the course of his or her medical care. The numbers behind these stories are staggering.

According to the Institute of Medicine, medical errors injure nearly one million Americans each year during hospital stays, and nearly 100,000 patients die as a result. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in five 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 for more than 10 percent of all hospitalized patients.

Our health care system is not as safe as it could be. Most health care providers are wonderful people who are trying their best. Yet our health care system is complicated and fragmented. Errors happen because of problems with the system, and we need many systemic fixes to get the care we deserve. Everybody has a role to play — hospitals, caregivers, payers, politicians, government, and patients themselves.

Patients are on the front line of safety. When informed and empowered, they can be the first line of defense against errors. Armed with necessary information, patients and families can make good decisions for themselves and motivate providers to improve their practices.

Last year, for the first time, people in Massachusetts 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 Sen. Richard Moore and 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 apology could be used in a lawsuit, and ensures a patient and family 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 (DPH) will begin collecting data on hospital-acquired infection. DPH 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 to care 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 patients, employers, and government through higher health insurance premiums and direct care costs.

We can make 2008 the year when our insurance cards gain us more than access to health care. We need the quality of system that guarantees that our care is safe, timely, effective, efficient, equitable, and patient-centered. In order for this crucial message to be heard, we need the support and commitment of the Massachusetts Legislature.

Rep. Denise Provost represents the 27th Middlesex District.

Dori Peleg, Somerville resident, is a member of the Consumer Health Quality Council.

