

Stevenson: A consumer voice for patient safety

GHS

Posted Mar 11, 2008 @ 12:20 AM

We have all heard stories about health care gone wrong. Earlier this year, Dennis Quaid's twin babies received an overdose of medication, Kanye West's mother died of surgical complications, and a man in Rhode Island had three brain operations; all on the wrong side of his brain. While these stories of harm sound drastic and perhaps feel removed from us, they are closer at hand than we may realize.

A delayed lab result, a misdiagnosis, an infection that developed while in the hospital are where stories of harm begin. The majority of errors happen because of systemic problems and breakdowns, not because of bad doctors. Lack of coordination, miscommunication, and delays occur because the system is fragmented and complex. This is the system in which our health care professionals perform routine and life saving work.

According to the Institute of Medicine, medical errors injure nearly one million Americans each year during their hospital stay. Among these injured, nearly 100,000 patients die as a result. In Massachusetts, the New England Healthcare Institute estimates one in every 10 Massachusetts patients suffers an avoidable medication mistake. And according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in five inpatient hospital admissions results in a hospital-acquired infection.

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 Senator Richard Moore and Representative 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 would be used in a suit, and ensures a patient voice in care through rapid response methods and patient councils.

Consumers are on the front line of patient safety. Informed and empowered consumers can be the first line of defense against errors and system failures. Patients have a right to know how hospitals are performing. The public has a right to know whether a hospital is struggling with a problem such as infections. Armed with the necessary information, patients and families can make truly informed decisions and participate in improvement efforts. Healthcare transparency is about creating openness, honesty and truth-telling in healthcare. This bill is securing the patient's right to know and be a part of the decision making process. Every person is or will be a consumer of healthcare. At some point, we will all be faced with making important healthcare decisions for ourselves or someone we care about.

While Massachusetts is making remarkable progress in improving access for many of our uninsured residents, we believe quality improvement and cost control need to 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. Quality control is the best form of cost control.

Our health care needs to become safer. The good news is we all can take a role in improving the system.

Jamie Stevenson of Waltham is vice president of the Consumer Health Quality Council.

Copyright © 2008 GateHouse Media, Inc. Some Rights Reserved.

Original content available for non-commercial use under a [Creative Commons license](#), except where noted.