

Editorial: Shine a light on medical mistakes



GHS

Sun Jul 22, 2007, 12:45 AM EDT

"First, do no harm," often attributed to Hippocrates, is a goal modern medical professionals surely embrace. But harm comes to patients in hospitals every day, and often it is avoidable harm. Infections are spread from patient to patient. Poor communication of patient needs between medical staff can result in bad drug interactions - or much worse.

Hospitals even have a term for the worst medical mistakes: "never events." They are things that should never happen in a hospital, like a surgeon removing the wrong kidney, doing the right operation on the wrong patient, or leaving a sponge or clamp inside the patient.

But "never events" do happen; too often, however, they don't get reported. And the hospital-acquired infections and medical errors that are reported to state health officials are not reported to the public.

It may be understandable that hospitals and physicians don't want their mistakes made public, but it's bad public health policy. Health Care for All, the advocacy group instrumental in pushing last year's health care reform legislation, wants to change that. It is organizing Consumer Quality Councils to bring the voices of patients to health care providers and pushing legislation to expose medical mistakes to the light of day.

These changes are part of a culture shift in health care. Physician arrogance and patient timidity are giving way - too slowly, perhaps - to a new ethic of empowered patients and responsive professionals. Increasingly, Massachusetts and other states are using the Internet to share information about physician performance, hospital staffing and other indices. About 19 states make public information on medical mistakes, HCFA says, and it's time to add Massachusetts to that list.

HCFA's medical errors bill, sponsored by Sen. Richard T. Moore, D-Uxbridge, and state Rep. Denise Provost, D-Somerville, also calls for the rate of hospital-acquired infections to be reduced to zero, a goal that has been reached in some other states.

It also targets one problem more attributable to lawyers than physicians, by allowing medical professionals to apologize to patients without increasing their legal liability. An apology is something many patients want most of all, and many physicians want to say they are sorry, but attorneys strongly advise them not to, for fear it will be used against them in court.

The bill deserves a fair hearing and the issue deserves serious debate. Mistakes will be made; no

one is perfect. But the way to prevent future mistakes is to bring them out in the open, not sweep them under the rug.

WEB BROWSING REDEFINED  FIREFOX 2