Costly Mistakes

By Reg P. Wydeven
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A few years ago I had to have a surgical procedure performed. The doctor informed me that it was only minor surgery. As my dad says, however, it's only minor surgery when it's not you.

When I got to the clinic and was ready for the procedure, the head nurse walked in and warned the doctor that the clinic was about to undergo a mandatory fire drill. The doctor contemplated this and then instructed me that he was going to be using a laser, so when the alarm went off I shouldn't jump. I told him that he was holding the laser, so HE shouldn't jump.

Thankfully, neither of us jumped and the procedure went off without a hitch. Well, except when the fire alarm went off with many sirens and lights, so my wife, sitting patiently in the waiting room, assumed I went into a Code Red.

While I was greatly helped by my terrific doctor, some patients aren't so lucky. Everyone makes mistakes. If it's your lawyer or accountant, it may cost you some money; if it's your doctor, however, it may cost you a lot more.

That's why the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has introduced the "Partnership for Patients" program. According to HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, the program aims to reduce millions of preventable hospital related complications and injuries. By doing so, HHS expects to prevent 60,000 deaths over the next three years and save approximately $35 billion in health care costs, $10 billion of which would be attributable to Medicare.

In a recently released study in Health Affairs, one-third of hospitalized patients suffer some sort of medical error or adverse event, while about 5% get a hospital-related infection. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has determined that nearly 2 million Americans get an infection when hospitalized every year. According to an investigation by the Institute of Medicine a decade ago, almost 100,000 patients die each year as a result of medical errors.

To get the "Partnership for Patients" program off the ground, HHS will invest up to $1 billion in federal funding from the Affordable Care Act. Half of that amount will be immediately available to assist hospitals in achieving two goals: (1) prevent errors and complications; and (2) thwart complications resulting from moving patients from the hospital to an outpatient setting.

Hospitals hope to prevent errors and complications in nine areas, including adverse drug reactions, childbirth complications, infections at surgical sites and pressure ulcers. By reducing complications with patient transfers, hospitals aspire to cut hospital readmissions by 20%. If hospitals are successful, HHS estimates that more than 1.6 million patients would not need to be hospitalized again within 30 days of being discharged.

A portion of the funding will be used to create tools that doctors can use to help improve safety and continuity of care for patients. The new preventative measures will be implemented by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Innovation Center. According to Dr. Donald Berwick, the CMS administrator spearheading the program, the initiative could reduce Medicare and Medicaid costs by more than $50 billion over the next decade.

HHS has received lots of support for the initiative from physicians and nurses groups, including the American Medical Association, along with consumer groups and employers. More than 500 hospitals have already committed to the program.

If the program is successful, hopefully no patients will ever hear a doctor say, "Oops."