

Health

When medical errors kill



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Hospital errors are responsible for the deaths of at least 100,000 Americans and 40,000 Britons every year. A further one million patients are injured every year in hospitals in the US alone.

The situation has become so bad that America's Medicaid health insurance system will, from next month, refuse to pay hospitals for eight common errors which they believe are avoidable. The insurers' umbrella group, the Centres for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), may eventually add another nine situations to the list (JAMA, 2008).

The CMS acting administrator Kerry Weems said: "Medicare

can and should take the lead in encouraging hospitals to improve the safety and quality of care and make better practices a routine part of the care they provide not just to people with Medicare, but to every patient they treat."

The first rumblings of discontent were made by The Institute of Medicine in 1999, with its influential report, 'To Err is Human: Building A Safer Health System', in which it pinpointed the extent of the problem and the numbers of patients being harmed.

The true extent of medical errors may never be known, and it's accepted that the official fig-

ures are a low approximation. One study estimated that medical errors kill more like 180,000 Americans every year and went on to describe the rate as "equivalent to three jumbo jet crashes every two days".

In the UK, around 850,000 errors occur in hospital every year, and 40,000 patients die as a result. However, as in the US, these are conservative estimates and based on an error rate of 2.2 per cent of all admissions.

A more accurate rate, based on a meta-analysis of several studies, is around 4.75 per cent which, if correct, means that the true figures should be twice the numbers being officially reported.

Interestingly, a Canadian government commission has concluded that hospitals are more dangerous than mines and factories. The commission was created after 44 patients died in Canadian hospitals due to the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) infection.

The cases on the new 'no pay' list from America's health insurers include objects left in the body - statistics prepared for insurance companies in the US believe that one patient in 1,500 undergoing surgery will have either an implement, or material, left inside the body after surgery.

These items could be metal implements, swabs or sponges. Clearly the metal items cause a quick reaction, prompting immediate surgery. However, fabric-based items could cause a chronic problem taking years to surface.

Falls in hospitals and care homes are common, especially among the elderly, but they are not immediately associated with medical errors. Studies into the problem have found that they are often the consequence of surgery combined with a failure to provide patient aides to prevent falls. A study at the University of Hamburg found that falls were more common in people who were staying in hospital for at least 28 days and probably undergoing more complicated treatment.

"The true extent of medical errors may never be known"

Infection is relatively common following surgery with around 7.6 per cent of patients developing some type of infection during their stay in hospital. Around two million people each year fall victim to an infection while staying in an American hospital, with 100,000 dying as a result. According to research in the UK, the most common infections involved the gastrointestinal tract which accounted for 20 per cent of all infections. This was followed by infections of the urinary tract which affected 19.9 per cent of patients.

Surprisingly MRSA, despite the global headlines, is only responsible for 2.3 per cent of all infections. However, in a study of 147 hospitals in the UK, out of all patients fitted with a catheter, 15 per cent developed an infection. This rate increased to 46 per cent if the presence of inflammation around the catheter site was included. The rate also increased the longer the catheter was in place.

Pressure ulcers have become common as a result of a lengthy stay in hospital, especially among the elderly. Various studies show that most of the ulcers were assessed as Grade 1, which is particularly painful.

However, only half of the patients had the use of a pressure-reducing mattress. More next week.

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