



FACT SHEET

Medical Mistakes

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Over a decade ago, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) put the spotlight on how **medical mistakes result in tens of thousands of preventable patient deaths each year and millions of dollars in unnecessary medical costs.**¹

Many medical mistakes – such as medication and diagnostic mistakes – are the product of innocent human error. However, medical mistakes also come in the form of overuse, underuse and misuse of care, which often result when treatment decisions are not supported by medical evidence. Instead, treatment decisions are often motivated by subjective beliefs, supply, fear of litigation, and patient demand. Indeed, **the IOM concluded that the chasm between the care patients receive and the care they deserve can be closed, in part, if providers would rely more on evidence-based medicine.**²

The fact that providers’ decisions are often *not* based on medical evidence is demonstrated by the illogical variation in the practice of medicine throughout the United States. For example, in Stowe, Vermont, 7% of children had their tonsils removed. In Morrisville, just two hours away, 70% of kids had their tonsils removed.³

Significantly, increased care is not linked to better outcomes because it exposes patients to increased risk of harm.⁴ Evidence-based medicine ensures better care and better outcomes.

REFERENCES:

¹ *To Err is Human: Building a Safer Health System*, Institute of Medicine (1999).

² *Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health System for the 21st Century*, Institute of Medicine (2001).

³ *Overtreated*, Shannon Brownlee, (2007).

⁴ “Avoiding the Unintended Consequences of Growth in Medical Care: How Might More be Worse?” Elliott S. Fisher and H. Gilbert Welch, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, (Feb. 3, 1999-Vol. 281, No. 5).

⁵ “Preventing Medication Errors,” Institute of Medicine Report Brief, (July 2006).

⁶ “Acute appendicitis in children: Emergency department diagnosis and management,” Steven G. Rothrock, *Annals of Emergency Medicine* (Vol. 36, No.1, July 2000).

⁷ “Doctors May Risk Overuse of CT Scans,” Suzanne Sataline, *Wall Street Journal*, (Nov. 29, 2008).

⁸ “The State of the Nation’s Health,” Maggie Mahar, *Dartmouth Medicine Magazine*, (Spring 2007).

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TYPES OF MEDICAL MISTAKES

MEDICATION ERRORS

It is estimated that, each year, medication mistakes harm at least 1.5 million patients in the United States. **A hospital patient can expect to be subjected to more than one medication error a day.**⁵

DIAGNOSTIC ERRORS

- Diagnostic errors, such as errors or delays in diagnosis, failure to use appropriate tests, use of outdated tests or failure to act on the results of tests accounted for **17%** of the medical mistakes found in the IOM’s initial study.¹
- Appendicitis is the most common and serious misdiagnosis in the ER. Rates of diagnosis in children range from 28% to 57%; in infants, the misdiagnosis rate is almost 100%.⁶ Fifteen percent of people who have their appendix removed do not have appendicitis.³

THE OVERUSE, UNDERUSE AND MISUSE OF CARE

Treatment decisions not rooted in medical evidence lead to mistakes in the form of overuse, underuse and misuse of care. In fact, it is estimated that over 1/3 of the **\$2 trillion spent on U.S. health care is squandered on and 30,000 lives are lost to such treatment decisions.**³

Tests of dubious value:

- Each year, **doctors recommend millions of tests**, such as MRIs, blood tests, and CT scans that are costly and do little to little to diagnose disease.³
- Columbia University researchers found that patients are exposed to dangerous levels of radiation when doctors order too many unnecessary diagnostic CT scans.⁷

Supply-Driven Treatment:

Over 40 years of research has demonstrated that **treatment decisions are frequently driven by capacity**, such as empty hospital beds that need to be filled. For example, physicians treating hip fracture patients in high-capacity hospitals recommend 82% more hospital visits, order 26% more imaging exams, and 90% more diagnostic tests, and 46% more minor surgeries than necessary.⁸