

THE FACTS ABOUT PATIENT SAFETY IN PENNSYLVANIA

It is a simple fact that the best way to reduce medical malpractice lawsuits is to reduce the number of preventable medical errors that prompt many suits in the first place. Unfortunately, it is clear that the medical community has done little to reduce medical errors – and actively opposes efforts to increase disclosure of them.

- 1) **There is an epidemic of medical errors in America.** Independent studies have pegged the number of deaths from preventable medical errors at a low of 98,000 annually (almost double the number of American deaths in Vietnam) and a high of 195,000 (the equivalent of two jumbo jets going down every day). According to a recent U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and Johns Hopkins University report, preventable medical errors add \$4.6 billion to health care costs. Their findings echo similar findings from the Institute for Medicine. [[Wall Street Journal](#), 10/8/03; Health Grades, “Patient Safety in American Hospitals”, 7/04]
- 2) **4 out of 5 doctors say they have seen a colleague take a “shortcut” that could endanger a patient’s health.** According to a new report co-authored by the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses and VitalSmarts, a leadership and organizational performance consulting firm, 4 out of 5 U.S. doctors say they have seen a colleague make a mistake that could endanger patient care, but only 10 percent of them had spoken up about the mistakes they have witnessed. 50 percent of nurses also say they have seen a colleague make a mistake. [[Seattle Post-Intelligencer](#), 1/27/05]
- 3) **The number of doctors being disciplined in Pennsylvania increased by 50 percent in 2004.** In 2004, the number of disciplinary actions taken against Pennsylvania physicians increased by 50 percent over 2003, from 242 to 362 according to the State Boards of Medicine and Osteopathic Medicine. The increase in disciplinary actions this year can be attributed to the state’s increased emphasis on “prosecuting unprofessional and incompetent behavior by doctors,” Secretary of the Commonwealth Pedro A. Cortés said. [[Philadelphia Business Journal](#), 4/26/05]
- 4) **Secrecy is one of the biggest problems facing the medical community.** Experts across the board agree that the secrecy surrounding medical errors is one of the biggest problems in health care. Kenneth Segal, the policy director for the Pittsburgh Regional Healthcare Initiative, has said that “Today most errors ... are hidden. If we need to be safe, we need to have much more openness.” [[Philadelphia Magazine](#), 5/04; [Tribune-Review](#), 5/14/04]
- 5) **The Pennsylvania medical community has fought greater disclosure of errors.** Unfortunately, Pennsylvania doctors and hospitals have strenuously resisted public reporting of medical errors, including a mandate that Pennsylvania hospitals collect and make public information about infections acquired in their facilities. Over half the states in America allow patients to look up a doctor’s record on the Internet, but not in Pennsylvania. [[Harrisburg Patriot-News](#), 2/5/04]
- 6) **There is a real problem with retribution against those that speak up about poor care.** There has been a nationwide problem with retaliation against medical professionals who speak up about poor quality care. The Association of American Physicians and Surgeons (AAPS) has even formed a five-member committee to come up with a plan to stop the misuse of peer review committees to target doctors who speak out about poor quality care being delivered. [[Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#), 2/1/04, 10/26 -- 11/2/03]