

Patient safety: A serious global health issue

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When availing healthcare services, we tend to choose the best and the most renowned of providers expecting them to be safe through compliance with the highest level of safety standards. But however accredited these providers may be, assurance of patient safety is not always the case. Regardless of the economic and development status of the country and its healthcare system, patient safety incidents are increasingly being reported across the globe. According to recent statistics published by World Health Organization (WHO), there is a 1 in 300 chance of a patient being harmed in healthcare. Interestingly, WHO noted that industries with a perceived higher risk such as aviation and nuclear plants have much better safety records than healthcare!

Consequently, WHO has put patient safety as a global priority. However, improving patient safety and preventive healthcare measures still poses a major challenge both in developed as well as under-developed nations. In the wake of the World Patient Safety Day, here are some causes of lapses in healthcare and preventive measures to ensure patient safety:

Causes of this adversity

Human factors: Human error is one of the most prevailing causes of healthcare mishaps.

From distraction, stress and sleep deprivation that may lead to a cognitive bias and thereby inaccuracy, to inadequacy in the maintenance of cleanliness standards of hospitals—the factors behind the error may be many, and the effects just as adverse. Further, with several new researches emerging in the field of healthcare, it is hard to stay updated despite immense dedication, which may lead to a case of misdiagnosis, administration of wrong medication and surgical complications.

Errors in diagnosis: According to ‘Top 10 Patient Safety Concerns for Healthcare Organizations 2018’ compiled by Emergency Care Research Institute (ECRI), diagnostic errors ranked one. The institute also observed that 1 in 20 adults across the globe experience a diagnostic error each year. Whether it is rushed diagnosis based on just a cursory evaluation of the symptoms or a system-related error, these lead to a wrong, missed or delayed diagnosis. Depending upon the severity, these diagnostic errors may lead to further complications, wrong treatment or even death.

Incorrect or expired medication: Medication errors take place when a patient receives an administration of the wrong medication, counterfeit or substandard medicines, expired medicines and injection, reusing single-use devices, and etc. Unfortunately, these errors are very common in the healthcare sector. Being indifferent to the effects of medicines and not providing corresponding care has caused many accidents and even fatalities. For instance, some medicines have a side-effect that results in an increased risk of elderly patients losing balance, leading to a severe fall. Several studies indicate that the risk of falling among elderly patients is increased 3X when they are administered four or more prescription medications.

Complications in surgery: A research led by the International Surgical Outcomes Study Group suggested that about 50 million patients suffer from complications post their surgery, and around 1.5 million patients die subsequently owing to surgical complications every year. The complications may vary from an acquired infection, cardiovascular and gastrointestinal complications or even a wrong-site surgery. While some of these cases are inevitable, other instances could have easily been prevented.

Acquired infections: An infection that a patient may get when being treated upon is known as a healthcare-acquired infection (HAI). It may be a catheter-related bloodstream infection, acquired pneumonia or a surgical site infection. Of every 100 hospitalized patients at any given time, 7 in high-income countries and 10 in low and middle-income countries acquire healthcare associated infections, affecting millions of patients world-wide every year. These infections may lead to a prolonged stay in a hospital, longer recovery time or even death.

Faulty medical devices: The harm caused by inadequate or faulty medical devices have been traced in a global investigation titled ‘Implant Files’ led by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). The probe led in collaboration with 250 journalists across 36 countries encompassed that the probable cause for more than 1.7 million injuries and around 83,000 deaths in the last 10 years in US alone was linked to faulty medical devices. And the global picture is bleaker. In most of these cases, patients were unaware of the malfunction or were informed about it the last.

Preventive measures for healthcare providers

To improve patient safety and to minimize or eliminate medical errors, the healthcare organizations need to start taking responsibility and actively participate in the process of improvement and correction. Strict laws need to be made and enforced including serious action against the culprit and compensation to patients and their kin for all such cases,

however severe it is. The staff members of a hospital should be introduced to patient safety and preventive care modules. Further, attendance should be made compulsory for awareness workshops and training programmes. A judicious incorporation and beneficial utilization of technology into healthcare ecosystem such as automation of service delivery processes may also yield a remarkable difference in the astounding numbers of patient safety mishaps.

Preventive measures for patients

According to a study titled 'Inadequate Functional Health Literacy among Patients at Two Public Hospitals' by JAMA Network with 2600+ patients as subjects, it was observed that a staggering average of 55.4% patients across all age groups were unable to comprehend basic written or verbal medical instructions. And the numbers are not any different in a bigger picture. Inadequate health literacy among patients is a serious concern that needs immediate attention. An aware and actively involved patient can help in minimizing such errors and negligence when undergoing healthcare.

Through a clear communication with their doctor or medical consultant involving all the questions and concerns regarding their treatment, patients can do their bit to ensure their safety. Each detail on both the reports as well as the prescription should be delved into. Further, constantly researching through reliable sources about the diagnosis and going through the follow-ups of their treatment minutely can substantially help curtail issues regarding their safety.



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*This is a contributory article and the views expressed by author are his own.