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Protect Yourself From Medical Mistakes

Article #1 (Series of 2 articles)

Dr Lipman related that a look of surprise crossed the face of the 38-year-old advertising executive when he asked him during the course of a new-patient physical exam, if he always wore his safety belt. "What's that got to do with my health?" he asked. "Everything," Lipman replied. "My chances of saving your life over the next few years by making sure you wear your safety belt are much greater than if I put you on a drug to reduce your cholesterol."ⁱ The doctor was probably right, but things are not always as they seem. When we place a loved one in the hospital, we are generally relieved that they can now get the care that they need. Often, however, we unknowingly are exposing them to other risks.

"More Americans die each year from hospital-acquired infections than from auto accidents and homicides combined. Even though the problem has been well documented for many years, the risks for getting hospital infections have steadily increased during recent decades" (*New England Journal of Medicine*, 2003).

The Center for Disease Control estimates 90,000 infection-related deaths occur each year. (About 45,000 people a year are killed in vehicle wrecks.) The Institute of Medicine (IOM), which advises the government on health policy, highlighted those dangers in a 1999 study showing that errors made by hospital staff kill up to 100,000 people each year, and seriously injure roughly a half-million more.

A few states have taken the lead against this deadly health care problem by providing information about how successful their local hospitals are at preventing infections. But in most states, Alabama included, hospital infection rates are secret.ⁱⁱ

The *Birmingham Business Journal* reported in 2003 that MedMined Inc. and BlueCross BlueShield of Alabama started lining up as many as 40 Alabama hospitals to track - and hopefully to diminish - nosocomial, or hospital-acquired, infections.

Stephen Brossette, MedMined's President and Chief Technology Officer said, "Everybody loses with these infections." "Patients are adversely affected, hospitals lose money and insurers lose money."ⁱⁱⁱ The prevalence and cost of such infections are staggering.

There are many other ways patients are injured in hospitals. A 2004 study estimates that as many as 200,000 patients a year are killed or hurt by medical mistakes.^{iv} That is four times as many people as are killed in wrecks, and the equivalent of two large jet liners crashing every day of the year. Can you imagine the outrage that would occur in this country if two major jetliners crashed every day? How many days would it take until all of us would demand that our government ground all the planes until the problem could be discovered and fixed? Then why is there not an outcry about 550 people being killed and hurt every day in our hospitals? Instead, we have the President of the United States, the insurance industry, and big business clamoring, to protect profit hospital conglomerates rather than our families. Who pays the bill — we do, in higher taxes!

Until, or unless, we can force the state and federal administration to consider the real problems—insurance reform and reducing medical mistakes, we are left fending for ourselves. Our next newsletter will provide some ways you can protect yourself and your loved ones.

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Protect Yourself From Medical Mistakes

Article #2 (Series of 2 articles)

In our previous Newsletter, we mentioned that we would provide some ways to protect yourself and your loved ones from medical mistakes. Hopefully, you will find the tips listed below helpful. We wish you good health!

- 1) Do research on your condition, the doctor and hospital before you are admitted. Know what to expect.
- 2) Ask questions! If you have doubts, get a second opinion.
- 3) Bring a friend or family member. They can ask questions if you cannot or are too nervous. Make sure they understand you want them to participate. Learn about your options.
- 4) Bring a list of medications and all other nonprescription or over the counter items you take. Give the hospital a list and keep another with you for reference.
- 5) If you cannot read a prescription, ask that it be re-written. It should be readable. Learn its name, purpose, dose, possible side effects, and what it looks like. Write it all down; keep your own up-to-date medications record.
- 6) In the hospital, print your name and tape it above your bed, big enough to see. If you are allergic to something, include on the note "I AM ALLERGIC TO _____!"
- 7) If you are given a medication, make sure the nurse checks your chart and/or bracelet. Check your wristband yourself. Ask what the medication is and what it is for. If it looks different than you have been given before, ask why.

- 8) Make sure your healthcare providers wear gloves and/or wash their hands. Studies show that less than half of nurses and doctors follow this requirement.
- 9) Antibiotics are sometimes too strong and overused, or sometimes underused. If you are to have surgery, often pre surgical antibiotics are necessary. Surveys have found that fifty percent of the time, the timing is wrong.
- 10) If a catheter is needed, be aware that 40% of hospital infections stem from urinary-tract infections. If a catheter is in place 48 hours after surgery, inquire. Infections increase when a catheter is in place more than two or three days.
- 11) If you are having surgery on one limb—autograph the limb—THIS ONE! If it is otherwise, autograph the surgery site. Before you are put under, ask the surgeon to autograph the site as well.
- 12) Be courteous but assertive. Don't be intimidated. Make sure you understand and know what you are signing, if asked to sign something.^v
- 13) Go to <http://www.icafo.org> web page and follow their suggestions about other ways to protect yourself.^{vi}

ⁱ Consumer Report, Marvin P Lipman, M.D., January 2005

ⁱⁱ Consumer Report On Health[®] 1/05

ⁱⁱⁱ“Medical Team tracks Killer Bugs”, Tom Bassing, Birmingham Business Journal, 8/03

^{iv} “Health Grades quality study: Patient safety in American hospitals,” Health Grades, inc., Lakewood Colorado, July 2004.

^v These suggestions were compiled from a number of sources. They are intended only as a general outline. Satisfy yourself as to specifics necessary to protect yourself or a loved one.

^{vi} Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations (JAYCO)