

Health Policy Forum

The Impact of Serious Medication Errors for Health Care Providers

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Medication errors have the potential to cause serious harm to patients. What is often not considered is the profound impact these errors can also have on the personal and professional psyche of health care providers. Zane Robinson Wolfe, PhD, RN, FAAN, Dean and Professor of La Salle University's School of Nursing, presented her extensive research on medication errors, including the historical and cultural context of responses to errors.

Dr. Wolfe first explained the framework and interplay of the landscape for errors and subsequent consequences. Health care is stressful work performed in high-consequence systems where there is a significant potential for error. The level of personal and professional responsibility for patient care, and the expectations surrounding these responsibilities, carries a certain weight and burden. Health care errors are in complete conflict with the goals of alleviating suffering

and preventing illness. Additionally, the notion of a perfect nurse or doctor is a model that is reinforced through education and peer approval.

Traditionally, there has been a culture of blame and silence related to error. Some of the consequences of this culture are underreporting of error events and clinician self-blame. This culture has also served to hinder meaningful improvements in practices and systems.

Dr. Wolfe also described research related to the disclosure of errors. Patients not only want to be told about errors during their care, they want to know why and how the error occurred, and what will be done in the future to prevent similar errors. Patients and family members want a sincere, prompt, and compassionate apology. There is sometimes a disparity between patients and relatives and their desire for open, honest communication and what physicians actually do.

Physician reluctance to fully disclose is often based on their own emotions, discomfort, and fears.

The emotional impact of an error on a provider is not something that is typically openly discussed. Dr. Wolfe explored the psychological dynamics that often take place, even long after an error has been made. There is often a barrage of emotions from doubt, self-blame, sleep loss, lack of job confidence, anxiety, embarrassment, guilt, and remorse. On a more practical level, providers may face real consequences, such as probation, suspension, termination, or criminal prosecution.

Dr. Wolfe discussed the process that takes place when an error has occurred and she emphasized the need for support, education, resources, and counseling. Ideally, organizational approaches such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and team interventions help to diminish the long-term emotional impact and affect change. ■