

PROFESSION

73% of patients worry about medical errors, poll says

About two-thirds do outside research to double-check physician recommendations, but few patients inquire about clean hands.

By KEVIN B. O'REILLY, *amednews* staff. Posted Sept. 4, 2012.

Nearly three-quarters of patients say they are concerned about the potential for medical errors, according to a poll that sheds light on public perceptions of patient safety.

Three in 10 patients said they had experience with a medical error, either personally or through a close friend or family member. Twenty-one percent reported having been misdiagnosed by a physician, said the Wolters Kluwer Health survey of 1,000 American adults released Aug. 15. Wolters Kluwer is a Philadelphia-based publisher of medical journals and maker of point-of-care clinical software.

It is unclear whether patient concerns about medical errors have worsened with time.

A November 2004 poll of 2,014 adults conducted on behalf of the Kaiser Family Foundation and other organizations found that 34% reported that they or a loved one had experienced a medical error. Fifty-five percent said the quality of care had improved or stayed the same since the 1999 Institute of Medicine report "To Err is Human," which cited research estimating that 100,000 Americans are killed annually by preventable medical harm. Four in 10 said care had worsened since the IOM's report.

With 73% of those surveyed by Wolters Kluwer saying they are "very concerned" or "somewhat concerned" about medical mistakes, many patients reported taking steps to protect themselves. For example, 56% got a second opinion on a diagnosis or treatment plan. Nearly two-thirds did research on their own to "validate a diagnosis or treatment plan," the survey said.

That kind of patient research — often done with the help of Dr. Google — can put physicians in a tough spot, said Linda Peitzman, MD, chief medical officer at Wolters Kluwer Health.

"For most physicians, it's a double-edged sword," she said. "Physicians like a well-informed patient who has the facts and knows what's going on and can talk with them about their treatment plan. On the other hand, with the vast variety of sources out there, some patients are misinformed or find things that conflict with each other. Helping patients figure out that information can be a challenge."

Doctors should recommend reliable sources of information for patients to review for discussion at the next visit, Dr. Peitzman said.

Patients mum on hand-washing

Although patients may take the initiative in doing outside research and getting second opinions, few say they speak up about hand hygiene. In a bid to prevent health care-associated infections, many hospitals have posted signs encouraging patients and families to ask health professionals whether they have washed their hands. Yet only 18% of the patients asked about clean hands, according to the Wolters Kluwer poll (wolterskluwerhealth.com/News/Documents/White%20Papers/Wolters%20Kluwer%20Health%20Medical%20Mistakes%20Survey%20Executive%20Summary.pdf).

"There probably are some patients who feel awkward asking a physician to wash his hands," Dr. Peitzman said. "Historically, it's been a paternalistic relationship there. Asking a physician to wash their hands would be the same as giving legal advice to a lawyer. It might take some time to break some of those patterns."

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