

DOCTORS NEED TO ENSURE 'DO NO HARM' INCLUDED IN DEBATE OVER MALPRACTICE

HERECOMES A study that tells the doctor to focus on what Hypocrites, the further of medicine, has been advising them to do all these centuries - first, do no harm.

Doctors, before complaining about the trail lawyers and insurance companies, heal thyself. .

The study is an excellent one &from the Commonwealth Fund, not only for what it says but also for the way it says it.

Take the doctors obsession in the malpractice crisis - capping recoveries for pain and suffering! They view that as the panacea, as the first and last step in every and all solutions to the malpractice problem.

But this study puts that proposal away with this concluding summary statement "Simply capping awards applies a Band-Aid to the increases in premiums now bleeding many physicians, while leaving patient wounds unattended"

The title of the study makes perhaps the most important point in the malpractice debate: "Malpractice Reform Must It elude Steps to Prevent Medical Injury" (*Annals of Medicine, January 2004*).

It tells physicians to heal themselves by preventing malpractice. and stresses what this column has stressed over the years! The most basic cause of the malpractice problem is that there is too much malpractice. and something has to be done to prevent malpractice and to prevent the needless killing and injuring of patients that is without a doubt an epidemic that is not being controlled or even addressed.

So what is the solution? Doctors have to lead the battle to prevent malpractice. As the study notes, "Reforms that fail to harness the intellect and energies of physicians to address the largest problem - patient injury- miss a central cause of claims as well as a central issue for better health care."

The doctors hold the key to solving the malpractice problem and that is by leading the 'way to minimize malpractice.

For years, I've been suggesting they start by washing their hands and thus preventing countless thousands of deaths and injuries they cause by transmitting infectious agents almost every time they touch patients in a hospital.

Every study I've seen has found that most doctor's simply don't wash their hands before patient contact despite the most documented and simple precepts of infection control.

The second step would be printing or writing legibly when writing prescriptions or recording medical records. Again, the deadly consequences of sloppy or illegible prescriptions and other medical entries have been documented four to Sunday lies one medical practice that can be, should be, and must be improved.

This study, from the Commonwealth Fund, a leader in exploring the health care delivery system, documents that when doctor; put their minds to it, they can reduce injuries, deaths and premiums: After the American Society' of Anesthesiologists adopted practice guidelines to reduce patient harm, premiums decreased dramatically. "

But doctors by large have not assumed the leadership position that is their duty and that is in their self-interest. My observations can probably be shared by most people who have spotted a problem in a hospital, a doctor's office or other health-care facility.

'There seems to be almost indifference on the part of the provider's to what a patient often views as a matter of life and death. On more than one occasion I have had to threaten hospital administrators_with bad publicity before they would take action on the most outrageous violations of good practice.

The doctors act like bystanders when a quality problem of the most serious nature is called to their attention.

This study makes all the arguments for the medical profession. Assuming leadership in preventing malpractice and gives many specific examples of how that can be done. But I don't think the authors of the study comprehend the apparent stupor doctors are in when it comes to assuming this leadership role.

Nonetheless, the study is right on target in what it finds: "Physicians can and should ensure that 'doing no harm' comes first in the malpractice debate ".

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