

Reducing Medical Errors in the Hospital

The Role of Employers in Promoting Patient- and Family-Centered Communications to Improve Safety

THE CHALLENGE: Even with significant efforts to improve care, [medical errors](#) in hospitals that harm patients still occur at alarming rates and substantial avoidable financial and human costs. Including patients and families in conversations during rounds when possible shows great promise in reducing errors. National Alliance coalition members often serve as a bridge between employers and health systems, helping employers play a key role in driving costs down and safety and patient satisfaction up, starting with these four steps. Details about implementing the steps are found on side two.

1

Reduce hospitalizations by improving equitable access to and coverage levels for preventive care, paying particular attention to social drivers of health.

2

Collaborate with health plans and other vendors, asking them to establish accountability for integrating clear and effective end-to-end communication protocols across healthcare teams (i.e., diagnosis, treatment, discharge, transition to home).

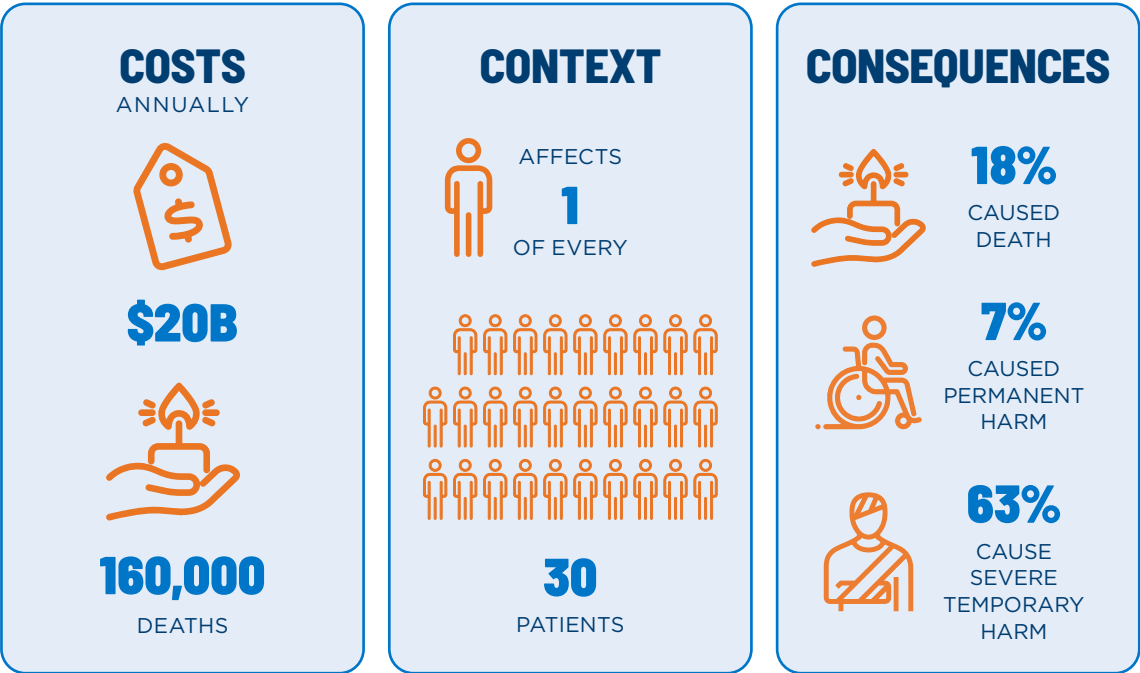
3

Ensure that employee education materials and health plan and hospital communications are attuned to literacy and health literacy challenges, optimizing communication methods and materials for common limitations.

4

Set expectations for vendors to provide continuous education and hospital safety checklists for employees to use for planned and unplanned hospital stays.

Facts about preventable hospital errors in the US



Source: [National Institutes of Health](#)

Health literacy

An integral part of patient safety

Patients with low health literacy:

ARE MORE LIKE TO VISIT A
HOSPITAL EMERGENCY
DEPARTMENT



HAVE MORE HOSPITAL STAYS



ARE LESS LIKELY TO FOLLOW
TREATMENT PLANS

HAVE HIGHER MORTALITY RATES

Source: [CDC](#)

54%

OF AMERICAN ADULTS
read below the equivalent of a
sixth-grade level, and **nearly one in
five adults** reads below a third-grade level.
Further, **nearly 9 out of 10 US adults** struggle
with health literacy.



Source: [Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy](#)

PCORI® Research Study

A research team wanted to see if improving communication would help reduce hospital errors and [adverse events](#). The team created a program to help doctors and nurses communicate with families during rounds. The program took place in hospital pediatric units.

The program included:

- ▶ A way to make sure doctors and nurses included families on daily rounds
- ▶ A way to make sure medical staff talked about everything important on daily rounds
- ▶ Write-up of rounds for patients and their families
- ▶ Training to help staff learn how to include families in rounds

The results:

- ▶ There was no difference in overall medical errors, but patients had 38% fewer harmful medical errors
- ▶ Patients had 46% fewer adverse events
- ▶ Parents rated their child's care experiences higher on 6 of 25 measures. None of the measures received a worse rating
- ▶ Nurses and parents were more involved in rounds, with parents speaking up more and asking more questions

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Details for employers/purchasers, following the recommendations on side 1:


1

Reduce Hospitalizations

- ▶ Improve access to and coverage levels for comprehensive preventive care and care for chronic conditions. 
- ▶ Hold virtual or in-person employee/family health fairs or promote community health events. Click [here](#) for examples of successful health events.
- ▶ Find creative, casual ways to invite healthcare provider partners to employee events, such as holiday luncheons or lunch-and-learn initiatives. Have translators on hand to meet the needs of specific employee communities.
- ▶ Meet face-to-face with all provider partners, including hospitals, at least annually to build relationships; check in on expectations and accountability; and review educational and marketing materials being provided.
- ▶ Understand the social determinants/ drivers of health in your organization, working to mitigate their impact.
- ▶ Promote the use of urgent care clinics and telehealth to avoid unnecessary hospital emergency department use.
- ▶ Work with your health plan to establish accountability for integrating clear and effective end-to-end communication protocols across healthcare teams (i.e., diagnosis, treatment, discharge, transition to home).

2


Establish Communication Protocols

- ▶ Ask your coalition, and health plans and other vendors to define patient-family centered communications expectations. Fact check to see that expectations are reasonable, reimbursable and enforceable. 
- ▶ Ask your health plan benefit partners how they are supporting training for medical professionals that addresses challenges associated with complex patient-family conversations.
- ▶ Advocate for a cultural shift within healthcare systems that promotes a culture of transparency and honesty.

Quick Tip: *Even in this era of hybrid work, employers often say toilet stall communications are a top tactic for sharing health education messages such as reducing medical errors.*


3

Educate Employees and their Families

- ▶ Strengthen shared responsibility partnerships with employees and their families. 
- ▶ If possible and rounds schedules and visitor hours permit, include families in patient conversations, especially in children's hospitals.
- ▶ Offer access to cost and quality comparison tools such as [Leapfrog Hospital Safety Grades](#).
- ▶ Invest in a culture of communications so employees know how to prevent and remediate hospital errors.
- ▶ Evaluate and revise health benefit communication materials to account for literacy and health literacy levels.
- ▶ Support and involve employee resource groups (ERGs) to foster a diverse, inclusive, workplace.

4

Partner with Health Plans, Vendors and Primary Care Groups on Continuous Education

- ▶ Ensure systems are in place for collaborative communications to protect patients from preventable harm, including [informed consent](#). 
- ▶ Address individualized needs through [continuous and coordinated care practices](#) to prevent avoidable hospitalizations and hospital errors.
- ▶ Prioritize continuity of care in hospital and outpatient settings.
- ▶ Develop reimbursement mechanisms that provide incentives for providers to engage in patient-family discussions.
- ▶ Integrate health system reporting of medical errors or adverse events in your network evaluation to establish/enforce accountability.

DID YOU KNOW?

Primary care doctors would need a 27-hour workday to follow current medical guidelines. That's why it's important to ask health plans and other vendor partners to identify and address time constraints and prioritize safety initiatives.

Source: [National Institutes of Health, 2023](#); [The New York Times](#)

RESOURCES

- ▶ [PCORI Study: Does a Patient- and Family-Centered Hospital Communications Program Reduce Hospital Errors?](#)
- ▶ [The Leapfrog Group Informed Consent Fact Sheet and Hospital Safety Grades](#)
- ▶ [Interventions to Prevent Potentially Avoidable Hospitalizations](#)
- ▶ [Approach to Improving Patient Safety: Communication](#)
- ▶ [AHA Checklists to Improve Patient Safety](#) (for providers)
- ▶ [AHRQ I'M SAFE Checklist and QuestionBuilding App](#) (for patients)

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