

# Good Behavior



## Center for Advancing Health

### What, Me Worry? Our Responsibility for Preventing Medical Errors

At the appointment before my most recent operation, I found that I had been scheduled for the wrong operation, there was no record of my drug allergies, and my name had been attached to a medical history that appeared to belong to my Great-aunt Katherine. I straightened this out and then underwent successful surgery on the correct body part two days later.

Hey! No harm done. What's the big deal? I played my part in the error-control system of the hospital and everything went fine. As a frequent health care "flyer," the check-in processes are all too familiar to me and I was alert and feeling OK at the time.

But what happens to those who are not familiar, or who are disadvantaged by their pain, their illness, their inability to read and understand or their reluctance to challenge the authority of those upon whom they depend to save their lives? How do we expect them to protect themselves from errors like the ones I uncovered?

Most of us have heard about someone who has experienced a medical error that hurt or killed them. Last year marked the 10th anniversary of the Institute of Medicine's report on medical errors *To Err is Human: Building a Safer Health System*, turning the spotlight once again on the persistent riskiness of health care. Although the IOM findings spurred federal and state agencies and local hospitals to develop initiatives to reduce errors, journalists and researchers have found that not much has changed in the intervening 10 years. The original IOM report declared that each day, medical errors kill as many people as would the crash of a jumbo jet. Today, even the report's original authors agree that the threat of unsafe care to patients remains about the same as it was when the report was published.

I am alive today in part because of the medical technology

that skilled clinicians have wielded repeatedly on my behalf. And I realize that advances in knowledge and technology contribute to increased complexity in health care delivery that in turn offers more opportunities for error. Because I am a frequent user of health care services, I have a keen ear for news about its safety: I also know that my care not only delivers relief from pain but also confers risks.

It is a tribute to the many patient advocacy and patient education groups that they recognize the extent to which we are on our own to protect ourselves from unsafe care: They have invested heavily in producing instructional materials – pamphlets, books and reminders in print and online – about how to prevent errors. But it is an uncomfortable situation in which we find ourselves, at once dependent on our doctors and nurses to use their expertise to ease our suffering while simultaneously being directed to question their competence and intentions.

Given the lack of progress in reducing medical errors over the past 10 years, it is fair to say that this situation will not likely change soon. Our role in protecting ourselves from medical errors is another example of how advances in health care place additional – often burdensome, sometimes unrealistic and occasionally futile – responsibilities on patients. The way health care is delivered in the United States today assumes that all of us will participate actively, knowledgeably and vigilantly in our care in order to benefit from it, regardless of our health, educational background or age.

How about it: Are you ready to do this?

  
**Jessie C. Gruman, PhD**  
 President

## From the Health Behavior News Service

The Health Behavior News Service regularly distributes stories summarizing new research on health behavior issues. These stories can be found online at <http://www.cfah.org/hbns/news/>

### December News Stories:

- **CHILDHOOD VACCINATION GAPS NARROWING IN U.S.** About three-quarters of U.S. children received recommended vaccinations in 2008, up from about half in 2000, reports a new study from the CDC.
- **WOMEN WITH PARTNER, BABY GAIN MORE WEIGHT THAN SINGLE WOMEN** The fact that a woman is married and has a baby has more influence on weight gain than being physically active, Australian researchers found.
- **FOR DEPRESSED WORKERS, STRESS ON JOB LOWERS PRODUCTIVITY** A new study shines a light on depression in the workplace, suggesting that psychological stress at the office - or wherever people earn their paychecks - can make it more difficult for depressed workers to perform their jobs and be productive.
- **TEACHING KIDS ABOUT STROKE CAN SPARE THEIR PARENTS DISABILITY** Teaching children how to recognize when family members are experiencing a stroke and to call 911 might be a good way to save stroke victims from becoming disabled permanently, according to a new study.
- **KIDS EAT LESS JUNK FOOD WHEN MIDDLE SCHOOLS STOP PROVIDING IT** Take the junk food out of school vending machines and cafeterias, and kids will eat less of it, according to a new study. And no, they won't eat more junk snacks at home to "compensate."
- **SEASONAL FLU SHOT AWARENESS HIGH IN HISPANICS, VACCINATION RATES LOWER** Although there is high awareness of the need for seasonal influenza vaccines, a new study of Hispanics in one California county shows low rates of actual vaccination, especially among men.

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*Evidence. Engagement. Equity.*

Since its founding in 1992, The Center for Advancing Health (CFAH) has worked to translate complex scientific evidence into information, policies and programs that will ensure that each person can make good decisions about their health and interact effectively with their health care providers. CFAH is an independent, non-profit organization that is supported by a number of philanthropic organizations (principally the Annenberg Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation) and individuals. Good Behavior is a monthly series, written by the Center's president, Jessie Gruman, PhD, and intended for health policy makers. The publication offers Dr. Gruman's perspective on emerging health care issues, and provides insight based on evidence about how best to address them. For more information, visit us online at [www.cfah.org](http://www.cfah.org)