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Medical Errors: It's Worse than We Thought

By Pat French

A new [study](#) indicates that nearly twice as many hospitalized Americans are being killed each year by medical errors than had been estimated in a 1999 review.

HealthGrades, Inc. examined hospital data over 3 years from Medicare patients in 1752 hospitals among all 50 states and Washington, DC. Among the 37 million hospitalizations that occurred from 2000 to 2002, there were 1.14 million "patient-safety incidents" (3.1%). Of the patients who had such an incident, almost 25% died. Extrapolated to the entire U.S. population, this would translate into more than 575,000 possibly preventable deaths, or about 192,000 per year. This is almost double the 98,000 deaths reported by a 1999 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, [To Err is Human](#).

In financial terms, these incidents accounted for \$8.54 billion in inpatient costs to Medicare over the 3 years, or about \$2.85 billion per year. Extrapolated to the whole U.S. population, this would represent an extra \$19 billion per year, which agrees with the costs estimated by the IOM report.

Given that Medicare patients make up about 45% of all those hospitalized, this represents a significant problem. In fact, if medical errors were included on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) list of causes of death, they would rank sixth, ahead of diabetes and kidney disease.

One reason for the substantially higher numbers in the HealthGrades report could be the different definitions used for "medical errors." The company examined 16 of the 20 patient-safety indicators defined by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality ([AHRQ](#)). Of these indicators, three — failure to rescue dying patients, bedsores, and blood poisoning after surgery — accounted for most of the incidents (60%), but only two — failure to rescue dying patients and the death of low-risk patients from infections — accounted for most of the deaths (75%). The IOM report did not include these last two indicators as errors, which could account for much of the difference.

HealthGrades, Inc. is a 5-year-old private company based in Lakewood, Colorado. It ranks the quality of care provided by hospitals, physicians, nursing homes, and other healthcare facilities. The HealthGrades study was released to coincide with the company's first Distinguished Hospital Award for Patient Safety, which honors hospitals with the best patient-safety records. In all, 88 hospitals in 23 states won this award for having the lowest rates of patient-safety incidents.