

December 15, 2010

Are Guns Safer than Hospitals?

A study from the New England Journal of Medicine shows that hospital safety is not improving. The study was conducted from 2002 to 2007 in North Carolina hospitals. Though limited to North Carolina, it was suggested that the findings were reflective of national trends.

The findings are troubling for a number of reasons. The study is the first large scale study of hospital safety since the 1999 study from the Institute of Medicine that found up to 98,000 deaths and over one million injuries occur each year in the United States as a result of medical errors. Apparently, these numbers have not improved nor have they been widely disputed.

The study was focused on North Carolina due to the state's hospitals high level of involvement in programs designed to improve patient safety compared to hospitals in other states. Despite North Carolina's emphasis on patient safety, the study found that 18% of all hospital patients suffered harm as a result of their medical care. Of those, over 63% were preventable. Many of these errors lead to serious injuries with 2.4% ending in the patient's death. Perhaps in light of North Carolina's emphasis on patient safety which is lacking elsewhere, it is generous to extrapolate the findings to the rest of the nation's hospitals.

Remarkably, the study found that many of the errors were the result of failures to implement proven safety measures, some of which would appear to be obvious. The study is perhaps most troubling in light of the political climate surrounding medical malpractice lawsuits and the continuing [myth of the medical malpractice lawsuit crisis](#). Opportunistic politicians, the insurance industry, many in the medical profession, and of course the Tort Reform movement ignore the reality of [medical negligence](#). Instead there is a continued pressure for caps on medical malpractice awards. There are even those that would ban them completely.

These arguments are meant to protect insurance company profits. They do nothing for the medical profession. After all, is denial of the problem beneficial to the medical community? They certainly do nothing to protect the public.

To put the dangers of medical care in perspective (up to 98,000 American deaths and over a million injuries each year), lets take a look at gun related deaths. During the entire Vietnam War from 1958 to 1973, there were around

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58,000 American soldiers killed. Since March of 2003, there have been around 4500 American soldiers killed in Iraq. The Center for Disease Control found that in 2002, there were 30,242 firearm-related deaths in the United States which included 17,108 suicides, 12,129 homicides and 1,005 undetermined/unintentional firearm deaths. The 12,129 homicides included legal intervention and war.

Add it all up with two major wars and one year of all gun related deaths (intentional, military, law enforcement, suicidal, accidental) and hospitals are still more lethal to Americans. Keep these numbers in mind the next time you hear a politician decry the attack of trial lawyers on doctors. You might also keep it in mind before your next hospital visit. Then finally you might ask what kind of greed, cynicism and opportunism would motivate a politician, insurance company or talk show host to argue against the only real protection and compensation afforded patients when they are harmed.

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