

Medical errors kill almost 100 000 Americans a year

Fred Charatan *Florida*

An expert panel from the Institute of Medicine, part of the National Academy of Sciences, found that medical errors kill from 44 000 to 98 000 Americans each year.

The chairman of the 19 member panel, William C Robinson, president of the W K Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek, Michigan, a private, grant making body, said, "These stunningly high rates of medical errors—resulting in deaths, permanent disability, and unnecessary suffering—are simply unacceptable in a medical system that promises first to 'do no harm.'"

The panel's report, which was released in November, recommended that a new federal centre for patient safety should be set up in the Public Health Service and should have a budget of about \$100m (£63m) a year, which is equivalent to just over 1% of the \$8.8bn a year in costs estimated to be attributable to preventable medical injuries.

Healthcare providers would be required to inform state governments of any medical errors leading to serious harm; currently only 20 states have such reporting requirements. Doctors and nurses would also be re-examined periodically by state licensing boards to evaluate their competence and their

knowledge of safety practices.

The report condemned the current fragmented system of handling medical mistakes, which relies on a combination of peer review, federal and state regulation, malpractice lawsuits, and evaluations by private accreditation bodies.

Nancy Dickey, a past president of the American Medical Association, which supports the panel's recommendations, was concerned about mandatory reporting and public disclosure of serious medical errors.

Dr Dickey said: "On the surface it appears to be a relatively straightforward step but actually it engenders all sorts of problems with confidentiality and liability. Doctors find themselves in a real bind."

However, the panel said that a crucial strategy in reducing errors was to shift the focus "from blaming individuals for past errors to a focus on preventing future errors by designing safety in the system."

Apart from citing surgical horror stories—like that of Willie King, who had part of the wrong leg amputated at University Community Hospital in Tampa, Florida, in 1995—the panel found that more than 7000 Americans died each year as a result of "medication errors," which included the prescribing or dis-



Willie King, who had the wrong foot amputated before having the correct one removed, appears at a rally to highlight negligence

persing of the wrong drugs. For example, the panel said, pharmacists often had difficulty deciphering the illegible handwriting of doctors who prescribe drugs (4 December, p 1456).

Karen M Ignagni, president of the American Association of Health Plans, which represents health maintenance organisations, said, "Health plans will rise to this challenge and will work with doctors, hospitals, and public officials to address these issues."

In an article in last week's New York *Sunday Times*, entitled "Do No Harm—Breaking Down Medicine's Culture of Silence," Dr Lucian Leape, a professor of health policy at Harvard, and a member of the expert Institute of Medicine panel, discussed the problems surrounding the task

of addressing medical mistakes. He said: "Physicians are taught that it's your job not to make a mistake. It's like a sin. The whole concept of error as sin, as a moral failing, is deeply ingrained in medicine, and it is very destructive. It means people cannot talk about it, because it is too painful."

● As the BMJ went to press, President Clinton announced that he accepted the institute's recommendations and would instruct federal agencies providing or financing health care to adopt all feasible techniques for reducing medical errors. □

The BMJ will be publishing a theme issue on error in medicine on 18 March and holding a one day conference on 21 March.

Bristol manager dismissed warnings as "exaggerated"

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

John Roylance, the senior manager of the Bristol hospital at the centre of an inquiry into children's heart surgery services, dismissed warnings about death rates because he thought they were "exaggerated."

Dr Roylance, chief executive of United Bristol Healthcare NHS Trust, told the inquiry this week of his reaction to a letter

from consultant anaesthetist Stephen Bolsin in 1990 which described death rates for babies under 1 year as "one of the highest in the country."

He said: "I was accustomed to this sort of exaggerated statement to support the improvements that individuals wanted." He told Dr Bolsin to discuss his concerns with the chairman of the medical committee.

Dr Roylance said he was not aware until 1995, after the final arterial switch operation went wrong and operations were suspended, that Dr Bolsin had compiled and analysed data.

He insisted that he had not seen a letter signed by anaesthetists at Bristol Royal Infirmary calling for a thorough

review of the services until after his retirement as chief executive.

Christopher Monk, director of anaesthesia, had earlier told the inquiry that he had shown the letter to the chief executive, who had replied that it was a matter for clinicians.

Dr Roylance said he found "offensive the suggestion that I would see a letter like this and say 'I do not want it, nothing to do with me.'" He added: "I would have been astonished if I had been shown this, and I would have reacted very quickly and very strongly."

Dr Roylance was struck off the medical register last year by the General Medical Council for serious professional misconduct, along with senior sur-

geon James Wisheart. A second surgeon, Janardan Dhasmana, was banned from operating on children for three years and lost his job.

At the end of four days' evidence to the inquiry last week, Mr Dhasmana broke down in tears and expressed his regret to the parents of the babies who died. He said he wished he could turn back the clock and added: "Whatever suffering I have gone through is no match to the suffering of losing a child."

He said he had been "dropped like a bullet from a great height." The scandal had ruined him. "They have ruined me professionally, financially. My family life has gone, and I have lost confidence in myself." □