

## Death by Medical Error is Tragic – But isn't it Tragic that Medical Error Happens at All?

By Katherine L. Pritchard

On August 15, 2016, the Huffington Post released [an article](#) that discussed the controversy over the number of deaths that occur due to preventable medical errors. According to the article, the [Institute of Medicine reported](#) that in 1999, up to 98,000 people died in American hospitals each year as a result of preventable medical errors. Now, in 2016, the article reports that a [study in the BMJ](#) declared that number has increased to more than 250,000, “making preventable medical errors in hospitals the third-largest cause of death in the country in 2013.”

The writer goes on to discuss how the numbers in question required a closer look and deeper study. How can one prove that medical errors caused the deaths of 98,000 people when those people were very sick to start? “This means that the death rate in the group with medical errors was probably similar to the death rate in a group without medical errors, casting doubt on those errors as being the cause of death,” the article states.

As the writer continues his report, he states:

“A 2010 study in The New England Journal of Medicine followed 10 North Carolina hospitals in the 10 years after the Institute of Medicine report. They found that the overall rate of harms, and the rate of preventable harms, did not significantly improve over that period.

Was this because we didn't pay enough attention in 1999? Will the **now** much larger numbers force us to pay attention? Maybe. But it's also possible that this tight focus is a **distraction**.

After all, the vast majority of preventable medical errors **don't result in death**...It makes headlines to say that medical errors in hospitals kill more people than guns or cars.” (emphasis added)

While the deaths that result from medical errors are tragic – regardless of what the true numbers may be – it concerns me that there is more controversy over the accuracy of said numbers and not the fact that medical errors occur at all.

After discussing the controversy of the numbers and discussing their overall accuracy, the writer asks us “Will the **now** much larger numbers force us to pay attention?” (emphasis added). Wait. Didn't he just tell us that the numbers were questionable? And “pay attention”? Pay attention to what – medical errors? Yes, we should – but people are too preoccupied with the controversy.

I was blown away when the writer said that the “tight focus [might be] a distraction” because “the vast majority of preventable medical errors don't result in death.” It doesn't matter! Medical errors that *don't* result in death are not any less substantial than those that do!

Medical malpractice cases that *don't* result in death need to become the cornerstone of bringing awareness to – not only those cases that *do* result in death – but to the reality that preventable medical errors do occur – and can be stopped.

A medical malpractice case is not important only if the patient in question passes away; a medical malpractice case is important because medical negligence even occurred at all – regardless of how severe, traumatizing, or life-impacting it was. Preventing medical errors means addressing those that do occur – no matter what.

Physicians, doctors, nurses, and the like usually pay a substantial amount of money for their education, training, and licensing so as to become qualified and lawfully certified to care for the health of others. More often than not, health care providers are well-paid. They recite in the Hippocratic Oath – “I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure.” With these factors in mind, should there even be allowance for errors? Obviously, health care providers are human; no one is perfect. But this is a serious problem amongst people who paid and are paying a lot of money, in addition to investing a lot of their time, to take it seriously. Yet, “hospitals kill more people than guns or cars”?

While living in the United States, I read more in the news about safety concerns resulting in gun legislation and car recalls than I do about medical error prevention. And yet medical errors cause more deaths than the other two.

It's time for a change!

Deaths that result from medical errors are tragic. But by bringing awareness and discussing the reality of medical error prevention – people can bring life.