

To Reduce Errors, Cut Here New Rules Require Doctors to ID Patients, Take 'Time Outs' and Sign Their Work

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Every year since 1995, JCAHO officials say, they have seen a rise in voluntary, confidential reports of such mistakes, which experts believe are significantly underreported. Determining the precise number is impossible because there is no mandatory national reporting system for medical errors, although a few states, including Florida, require that cases be reported to state officials.

In 1998, 16 wrong-site cases were reported to JCAHO, compared with 75 last year. Cases included the removal of the wrong breast and a noncancerous kidney, a biopsy on the wrong side of the brain and surgery on the wrong patient.

While wrong-site surgery constitutes only a fraction of the estimated 98,000 medical errors that kill hospitalized patients annually or of the approximately 60 million surgeries performed in the United States, medical experts say it is indefensible because it is so easy to prevent.

"This is not quite Dick and Jane, but it's pretty close," JCAHO president Dennis S. O'Leary has said, noting that many wrong-site errors are the result of "very simple stuff" -- such as whether the X-rays were placed on the view box correctly or whether anyone made sure the right patient was on the operating table.

By requiring all doctors to follow basic standard procedures prior to starting surgery, the commission has borrowed a long-standing requirement from commercial aviation, which orders pilots to follow a prescribed checklist prior to takeoff. Such standardization is alien in medicine, where physician autonomy is prized.

"We decided that an airline approach was necessary, where we all do the same thing in the same way and in the same sequence," Massaro said, adding that many doctors practice at multiple hospitals that have different procedures. "No matter what airline you get on, you hear the same set of instructions."

Terry Canale, former president of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, said that he has detected a softening in the opposition he encountered in 1997 when, under his leadership, the academy launched a "Sign Your Site" campaign aimed at its members. Studies have found that orthopedists have the greatest chance of performing wrong-site surgery because they operate on limbs.

"All these famous prima donna orthopedic surgeons said, 'I don't have time to talk to a patient before surgery' or 'I've never make a mistake, why should I do this?' " recalled Canale, who practices in Memphis.

"But I think surgeons have become a bit more realistic and more tolerant in the past four or five years about the problem of medical errors, and realize they better pay attention to this," he said.

"They're beginning to buy into the aviation model a little," Canale added. "Just don't tell them how to do the operation."