

The Unacceptable Costs of Medication Errors

According to a report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM), in any given week four out of every five U.S. adults will use prescription medicines, over-the-counter drugs, or dietary supplements of some sort, and nearly one-third of adults will take five or more different medications.

In hospitals, errors are common during every step of the medication process—procuring the drug, prescribing it, dispensing it, administering it, and monitoring its impact—but they occur most frequently during the prescribing and administering stages. When all types of errors are taken into account, a hospital patient can expect on average to be subjected to more than one medication error each day. However, substantial variations in error rates are found across facilities. An adverse drug event (ADE) arising from an error is considered preventable. It is difficult to get accurate measurements of how often preventable ADEs occur. One study estimated 380,000 preventable ADEs in hospitals each year, another study estimated 450,000, and these may likely be underestimates.

Based on national data from the IOM, up to 30 New Mexico residents die each year from adverse drug reactions. Another 1,700 are admitted to hospitals for treatment, at an average of \$10,000 per patient. The numbers are equally disturbing in other settings. Taking all of these numbers into account, the report concludes that at least 1.5 million preventable ADEs occur in the United States each year. The true number may be much higher.

Currently, fewer than 20 percent of prescriptions are electronic. Only 3 percent of hospitals nationally have electronic health records. It is estimated that e-prescriptions save providers up to two hours a day. Providers can use hand-held e-mail access devices, such as the Blackberry, to send prescription orders to pharmacies, so that the program does not require a major investment. E-prescribing programs can alert providers to conflicting medications, excessive dosage orders and other potential problems. Modernizing our prescription drug system will save lives and will improve the health of our citizens.

The New Mexico Prescription Improvement Coalition (NMPIC), established in February 2006, works to improve safety in delivery of prescription drugs in New Mexico. For more information on NMPIC, visit the NMMRA Web site at www.nmmra.org/providers/physician_medicare_nmpic.php or contact Galina Priloutskaya at (505) 998-9765 or gpriloutskaya@nmqio.sdps.org.