

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR ΓΡΑΜΜΑ ΠΡΟΣ ΤΟΝ ΕΚΔΟΤΗ

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### Quality of healthcare services and patient safety: Two sides of the same coin

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*“Active failures are like mosquitoes. They can be swatted one by one, but they still keep coming. The best remedies are to create more effective defenses and to drain the swamps in which they breed. The swamps, in this case, are the ever present latent conditions” (James Reason)*

The users of healthcare services are increasingly being considered to be the best assessors of the quality of the services provided. As a result of growing international concern, interest is shifting towards higher quality healthcare services that meet the needs and expectations of the users. In the Greek healthcare setting, patients appear to be asserting their rights increasingly, heightening their expectations and acquiring stronger consumer culture.

Contemporary healthcare systems tend to adopt evidence-based guidelines, focusing on reducing medical and nursing errors and adverse events in the provision of healthcare, with the aim of optimizing of the level of patient safety. Quality of services is also linked to economic efficiency, as attention to quality may reduce waste and promote more efficient use of resources, that is, ascertainment that resources are used in a way that allows full benefits to be reaped. Quality is a concept that continues to be up to date over time, as it incorporates the real social and economic requirements, as defined in terms of space and time.

#### Key words

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The most crucial aspect of quality is patient safety, which should be the primary objective of any modern healthcare system. Early studies on patient safety in the 1950s considered medical errors largely “inevitable diseases of medical progress”;<sup>1</sup> and scientific literature often referred to them as “the price paid for modern diagnosis and treatment”.<sup>2</sup> The occurrence of adverse events due to unsafe care is probably one of the ten foremost causes of death and disability in the world.<sup>3</sup> In high-income countries, one in ten patients experiences an adverse event while receiving hospital care, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).<sup>4</sup> These are often events that could have been predicted and prevented.

Medical error refers to an action or omission of a healthcare professional during the planning and implementation of healthcare provision, which contributes, or could contribute, to the further impairment of a patient’s health status and the healthcare provision system.<sup>5</sup>

Medication errors constitute a category of medical errors that occur most frequently in healthcare units. They refer to every preventable event that may cause or lead to inappropriate use of medicines or patient injury while the medical therapy is under the control of a healthcare professional or patient-consumer of healthcare services. This type of event may be associated with professional practices, healthcare products, procedures and systems, including prescription, communication through instructions, drug labeling, packaging and nomenclature, reformulation, dissolution, distribution, administration, education, monitoring and use.

The impact of medication errors on patients who are admitted to Intensive Care Units (ICUs) is more serious, since often these patients are receiving several medications, and have impaired capacity to adapt to the consequences of such errors (due to organ failure, immunosuppression, inability to communicate, etc.). Prolonged hospitalization, and the application of additional interventions may prove to be life-threatening throughout the hospitalized patient’s remaining life expectancy, and may even lead to death.<sup>6</sup>

Technological advances have contributed to the im-

provement of the quality of the services provided, and the use of technology optimizes the protection and safety of patients against eventual errors and events while receiving care. Internet installation and the use of personal computers in healthcare provision units facilitates the implementation of automated systems for the writing of medical instructions, thus eliminating errors attributable to illegible handwriting.

Electronic Medical Records (EMRs) constitute the only reliable implementation of medical, nursing and laboratory work. EMRs have been associated with limitation of errors, improved productivity and easy access to information regarding past medical interventions, and have thus substantially supported decisions on the administration of medications and detection of abnormalities in laboratory examinations. EMRs are therefore deemed as a key contributor to the improvement of the quality of healthcare services, but it should be noted that the optimal development and

implementation of EMRs further requires the development of an integrated information system.

In view of these developments, investment aimed at the efficient reporting and management of errors and adverse events should be a priority in health policy. Investment in the reduction of patient harm can yield substantial financial savings, in addition to improved patient outcomes. Given the current increased demand for healthcare services and the concurrent capacity constraints, improving quality may free up scarce resources and generate cost efficiencies, which will, in turn, increase the fiscal space for the healthcare system.

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## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

### Ποιότητα των υπηρεσιών υγείας και ασφάλεια ασθενών: Δύο όψεις του ίδιου νομίσματος

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