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On Saving Lives in Hospitals

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By Mike Taigman

"I'm losing my patience," said Don Berwick, MD, CEO of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI), during his opening remarks at a conference attended by 10,000 physicians and hospital CEOs.

Berwick said he is frustrated with the slow pace of improvement in American healthcare, especially in its apparent inability to make healthcare safer and more effective for more Americans. He set an aggressive goal to prevent 100,000 unnecessary deaths in American hospitals over the next 18 months.

A journalist in the audience listening to Berwick's comments asked, "Are you saying that we've been killing that many?" Berwick's sobering reply: "The fact that we are doing harm is a reality."

Berwick then listed several specific things that hospitals can do to help save 100,000 lives. At the top of the list? The deployment of "rapid response teams." According to Berwick, "A Rapid Response Team (RRT) may be summoned at any time by anyone in the hospital to assist in the care of a patient who appears acutely ill, before the patient has a cardiac arrest or other adverse event." The goal is to get to the patient before he or she really heads down the drain.

Sites that have implemented RRTs have reported a reduction in cardiac arrests and deaths, as well as a reduction in ICU and hospital bed-days among survivors of cardiac arrest, Berwick said. Among surgical patients, the deployment of RRTs has been associated with a reduction in the incidence of respiratory failure, stroke, severe sepsis and acute renal failure, as well as a reduction in the number of ICU admissions, length of stay, and postoperative mortality. A hospital with RRTs in Australia reduced in-hospital death rates by 37 percent. I don't know about you, but to me, these teams sound a lot like a small in-hospital paramedic systems.

Who knows best how to set up dispatch processes, response systems, team protocols and quality management for teams like these? My bias is that EMS leaders are in a wonderful position to help hospitals set up and maybe even manage these teams.

For more information, look at the IHI's Web site at www.ihl.org/IHI/Programs/Campaign.

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