

# Global goal: Reduce medical errors

## Protect yourself in the hospital

- ▶ **Ask doctors or nurses to wash their hands** before they treat you.
- ▶ **Before an operation, have the surgical site marked with permanent ink.** Confirm that a nurse or doctor marks the correct site.
- ▶ **Keep copies of your medical records and charts** — with written or typed notes from your doctor — not just your bills.
- ▶ **Make sure your doctor or nurse confirms your identity** — by asking your name or checking your wristband — before giving you medicine or treatment.
- ▶ **Read the label on your medication** before taking it or allowing someone to hook up intravenous fluids. Confirm that your name is on your medication. Check the dose and name of drug. Many medication names sound alike.
- ▶ **To prevent harmful interactions, tell your doctor or pharmacist about everything you take** — including over-the-counter medicine, vitamins, herbs, supplements, homeopathic remedies, alcohol or recreational drugs.
- ▶ **Tell your doctor about any allergies** or negative reactions that you have had to medicines in the past.
- ▶ **Make sure you can read the handwriting on a prescription.** If not, ask to have it printed or typed.

Source: Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations

## U.S. group will direct initiative

By Liz Szabo  
USA TODAY

The World Health Organization announced Tuesday that an American group will coordinate an international effort to combat medical errors, which seriously harm 1 in 10 hospitalized patients.

The initiative will be led by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, which inspects hospitals to ensure they meet safety standards, as well as its affiliate, the Joint Commission International, officials announced at a conference in Washington, D.C.

In a 1999 report, the prestigious Institute of Medicine found that 44,000 to 98,000 Americans die in hospitals every year because of medical errors — more than breast cancer or highway accidents. Since the release of that report, people have begun to see patient safety as a basic measure of health care quality, says Mirta Roses Periago, director of the Pan American Health Organization.

"Human error is inevitable. We can never eliminate it," says Liam Donaldson, chairman of WHO's World Health Alliance for Patient Safety. "We can eliminate problems in the system that make it more likely to happen."

In the new initiative, medical and patients groups around the world will share proven strategies to make patients safer, says Dennis

O'Leary, the commission's president. Experts will focus on safety measures that include:

- ▶ Ways to avoid mixing up drugs with names that sound alike.
- ▶ Procedures to safely place nasogastric tubes, ones that are threaded through the nose and into the stomach, which can be used to feed patients or to remove poisons.
- ▶ Procedures to prevent performing surgery on the wrong body part or even the wrong patient.

Donaldson says hospitals need to create environments in which people feel free to admit mistakes and learn from them. Too often, he says, people blame individuals instead of taking a broader look at systems that lack adequate safety checks.

Groups such as the commission and the American Medical Association have praised the Patient Safety and Quality Improvement Act of 2005 as a way to help doctors and hospitals learn from their mistakes. The legislation, which was signed into law in July, encourages voluntary reporting of medical errors and their causes in return for legal protection.

Donaldson notes that the medical profession could learn a lot from the aviation industry. Its careful reviews have dramatically improved safety in recent years.

Donaldson urged people to heed the advice of a mother whose child died because of a medical error. She told him, "I don't want anybody to be scapegoated. I want you to honor my son's memory. The way I want you to do that is to learn from him so this never happens to anyone else's son."