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Doctors Unlikely To Report Peers Who Make Mistakes

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By ALEXANDRA PERLOFF-GILES

Contributing Writer

Nearly half of doctors may be more likely to protect their colleagues than their patients, according to a recent survey by researchers at the Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH).

The study, released Monday, reveals that 46 percent of doctors admitted to not reporting a serious medical error they had witnessed.

Likewise, 45 percent admitted to not reporting a physician who they knew to be impaired or incompetent.

While the statistics may seem staggering, the study's senior author said in an interview that he was not shocked by physicians' failure to report these errors.

David Blumenthal, 70, director of the Institute for Health Policy at MGH, said the results did not surprise him because reporting a colleague is "very awkward" and can "open the door to legal complications."

"I understand that people fall short of their goals in life," said Blumenthal, who is also a professor at Harvard Medical School. "Doctors are human, and they have aspirations they don't meet."

The study also found that physicians failed to live up to standards in preventing the waste of medical resources, with over one-third of physicians accommodating a patient who insisted on a test that the doctor knew to be unnecessary.

And the doctors surveyed were also poor at managing economic conflicts, with a majority of respondents saying that they would refer patients to facilities in which they had financial stakes.

Nearly one-quarter added they would not inform patients of the potential conflict, even though such activities could be considered illegal under Medicare rules.

Blumenthal, who holds a public policy degree from the Kennedy School of Government in addition to his medical degree, said he believes that many physicians may not be adequately aware of the laws governing their behavior.

"It would be helpful to have legal training at every level of education—undergraduate education, medical school, and post-graduate education," he said.

The study, funded by the Columbia-affiliated Institute on Medicine as a Profession, is the first national survey exploring attitudes and conduct related to medical professionalism, according to the authors.

Researchers interviewed 1,662 practicing physicians, including three groups of primary care doctors—internists, family practitioners, and pediatricians—and three groups of specialists—surgeons, anesthesiologists, and cardiologists.

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