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Transferring Knowledge on Patient Safety

Lois K. Cohen, PhD

At the critical frontlines of global healthcare, lapses in patient safety can and do occur. According to the World Health Organization, tens of millions of patients are harmed annually as a result of unsafe healthcare, causing death or disability.[1] However, although this is a significant problem, authoritative information on safety incidents and recommendations to prevent further occurrences are not readily available.

The Patient Safety program, launched in 2004, is one of the major initiatives of the World Health Organization. WHO Patient Safety works "to coordinate, disseminate and accelerate improvements in patient safety worldwide."[2] It also serves as a vehicle for international collaboration and activity among governments, experts, professional associations, industry groups, and consumers.

PATIENT SAFETY RESEARCH

Central to this program is Patient Safety Research. The WHO has developed multinational, multifaceted initiatives to encourage and expand research into patient safety—and apply these findings to promoting safer healthcare. This program has identified the most constructive types of research into this problem as understanding the causes, developing and evaluating solutions, and translating improvements into policy and practice.[1] In addition, a short list of priorities has been determined, which includes: counterfeit and substandard drugs; inadequate competence training and skills; healthcare-associated infections; unsafe injection and blood practices; drug and medication errors; and care of the frail and elderly.[1]

GLOBAL PATIENT SAFETY ALERTS

Key to transferring this research into practice is making the information widely available in a standardized and easily accessible format. One approach to disseminating this information was launched on February 15, 2011—the Global Patient Safety Alerts website (www.globalpatientsafetyalerts.com). Global Patient Safety Alerts was developed by the non-profit organization, Canadian Patient Safety Institute (CPSI). This web-based, publicly available, global platform allows people to search information on patient safety incidents worldwide.[3] The intent is to provide a central place to discover these incidents and review recommendations for prevention.

To increase its value for healthcare practitioners and researchers, the website offers more than raw data on incidents. Patient Safety Incident Tools are available to help practitioners identify and respond to these events.[4] In the future, the website also plans to offer a Global Faculty section,[5] allowing visitors to pose questions to experts in patient safety, and a Global Learning Community,[6] a venue through which healthcare providers may share information, explore opportunities to collaborate, and identify emerging trends.

ADDING THE ORAL HEALTH PERSPECTIVE

As part of its Patient Safety program, WHO is developing a multi-professional edition of its *Patient Safety Curriculum Guide for Medical Schools*. In 2010, FDI World Dental Federation, the Organization for Safety, Asepsis, and Prevention (OSAP), and the International Federation of Dental Educators and Associations (IFEDA), along with other prominent global medical profession associations, took part in an official review of the curriculum guide in order to expand its content.[7] While the curriculum guide addresses generic patient safety skills for a wide range of health professionals, the purpose of this review was to approach the subject from a dental perspective, enabling the translation of this material to the oral healthcare profession through dental-specific examples.[8] The *WHO Multi-Professional Patient Safety Curriculum Guide Draft with Dentistry's Input* (June 2010) is available online at the OSAP website (www.osap.org/resource/resmgr/Patient_Safety/WHOmulti-curricularguide.DRA.pdf). Through this curriculum, it is hoped that students will be educated about real-world incidents and become the next generation of patient safety leaders.

In addition to the student curriculum, there are comprehensive, authoritative educational opportunities for transferring knowledge on incidence data and state-of-the-art patient safety practices in oral health. For example, this month, Sir Liam Donaldson, Chairman of the WHO's Patient Safety Initiative, will speak at OSAP's annual Infection Prevention and Safety Symposium, which will highlight "recent changes impacting dental infection prevention and the science of safety in technology, guidelines, regulations, policies, practices and products."[9] The organization recently announced a significant new focus on advocacy, and this program is designed to offer attendees the essential tools to apply this latest information within their fields of expertise.

CROSS-CULTURAL CHALLENGES

In the dissemination of patient safety initiatives worldwide, researchers and educators must be aware of differences between regions, countries, professions, and cultural sensitivities. "When disseminating WHO's Curricular Guide on Patient Safety, we'll face healthcare scenarios in diverse transitional stages," explains Enrique Acosta-Gio, DDS, PhD, a professor in the School of Dentistry at the National University of Mexico, in Mexico City. "For example, healthcare systems in industrialized countries may already have fully functional Patient Advocacy Groups, Quality Assurance and Risk Management Committees. In some instances, however, some of these organizational structures may have to complete the transit from 'damage control operations' toward no-blame-assigning bodies where reporting adverse events followed by their root cause analysis are core strategies to promote a safety culture."

Acosta-Gio cautions that while working to collect reliable information, researchers and policy makers must comprehend the legal differences between countries. "Some industrialized nations have legislation on full disclosure and apology," he says. "In contrast, in the developing world, along with the prevailing lack of financial resources and shortage of trained healthcare personnel, there may be strong cultural barriers to admitting and reporting adverse events."

ACTIVITY ON MANY FRONTS

Scientia potentia est. In the global effort to improve healthcare delivery and patient safety, the collection and dissemination of knowledge has been emerging through a number of approaches: small research grants, newsletters, online courses, country research studies, and research curriculum and competencies—all dedicated to this important issue. As the culture of patient safety emerges and strengthens, the quality of life for global citizens will continue to improve.

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Combating Antimicrobial Resistance

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is the resistance of bacteria, viruses, and certain parasites to conventional treatments (antibiotics, antivirals, and antimalarials) to which they were formerly sensitive. AMR is not an isolated problem, and preventative actions need to transcend physical and organizational boundaries. A comprehensive response across many different sectors is needed, with more financial commitment from national budgets and international organizations. For vulnerable areas worldwide, innovative interventions need to be developed.

For the 2011 World Health Day, the World Health Organization issued an international call for concerted action to halt the spread of antimicrobial resistance.[1] WHO has identified essential areas of response, including: surveillance systems and policy guidance; methods to ensure quality and uninterrupted supply of medicine; infection prevention and control; and improved patient safety.[1]

Preventing AMR is essential for the public health and safety of the world's population. Further information can be found at the World Health Organization website at http://www.who.int/drugresistance/en/index.html. In addition, the *Pan American Journal of Public Health* is publishing a special issue on antimicrobial resistance, which will be available on September 25, 2011, on the PAHO website at http://new.paho.org/journal.

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