

dence and characteristics of these decisions is important for such a debate. For participation in the debate it is also necessary to read the original data.

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## The Emotional Impact of Mistakes on Family Physicians

Concerning the editorial, "Physicians' Mistakes,"<sup>1</sup> and also the article by Dr Newman, "The Emotional Impact of Mistakes on Family Physicians"<sup>2</sup>—yes, we all make mistakes, as we all know. The pity of it is not just the mistake itself, but that the atmosphere in which we practice militates against our learning from each others' mistakes.

About 2 or 3 years ago, there was a spate of items in various medical journals (mainly letters to the editor) about whether it was as much fun to practice medicine compared with 10 or 15 years before (*American Medical News*. August 23, 1993:30 and October 4, 1993:27f). The fact that we do not discuss our mistakes is part of the reason much of the "fun" is gone.

This whole topic of "mistakes" and the difference between now and then was brought forcefully home to me in, of all places, the Cardiology Institute in Mexico City, Mexico. A large delegation from the Maryland medical society scheduled 3 days of lectures at the institute. One of the most fascinating papers read was by the director of the institute, and consisted of an hour of discussion, complete with statistics, x-rays, cine-aortography, and so forth of various clinical procedures and diagnostic studies that had gone "wrong." This paper elicited a lively discussion, as physicians in the au-

**Editor's Note:** Most malpractice insurance companies and risk management consultants recommend that physicians not discuss potential lawsuits, ie, mistakes, with anyone except their lawyer. That way, physicians cannot be forced in court to testify that they have already admitted "guilt." I think this forced silence makes the burden of malpractice suits even greater.

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dience began exchanging clinical information on things that had gone wrong for them.

Eventually, a member of the audience asked the inevitable question, "What do you do about malpractice?" The answer brought first a pause, and then even some cheers as some of the audience stood. The director said that in Mexico it was illegal to sue a doctor who had merely made a mistake.

'Nuff said.

This is the reason that we feel so constrained with one another about our mistakes, and the pity is we then have lost opportunities to learn from them and to help one another and, ultimately, our patients.

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*in reply*

I agree with Dr Guazzo that we have created an environment that constrains our capacity to learn from one another's mistakes. A number of factors are responsible for this lack of opportunity. A primary reason is our preoccupation with perfection. Our perfectionism is embedded in personal, social, and professional norms. One of the greatest challenges we face is accepting ourselves for who we are. By nature of our inherent human imperfection, we all are bound to miss the mark and make mistakes. But the high expectations we have of ourselves often do not allow us to be any less perfect in our personal lives than in our professional roles.

The physicians in my study condemned themselves not so much because they feared malpractice, but primarily because they were ashamed of their mistakes and afraid of what other people would think of them. A culture founded on compulsion, overachievement, and being in control makes vulnerability, fallibility, and imperfection taboo. Being less than perfect is shameful, and disclosing failure is humiliating.

Unfortunately, as Dr Guazzo points out, the looming threats and painful wounds of malpractice rob us of opportunities to learn from our mistakes and help each other. They compound our tendency to hold in negative feelings and turn them against ourselves instead of sharing them with others. These conditions should compel us even more to re-create an environment where we can feel safe, receive support, provide acceptance, and experience forgiveness. This requires us to take the risk of being vulnerable and opening up to one another. Doing so will hopefully enable us to overcome our perfectionism and accept ourselves for who we really are.

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