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# Ways to improve hospital stays

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In "Preventable medical errors merit concern, doctor says" (Science & Health feature, July 29), Dr. Sanjaya Kumar was quoted as saying, "Patients and their friends and loved ones should educate themselves as much as possible to risks of medical care."

There is something everyone can do immediately to improve the chances of surviving a hospital stay.

There must always be someone — a family member or good friend — to act as a sentinel to oversee hospital care in an effort to prevent medical errors. The hospitalized patient cannot do this for himself. The following strategies are simple to implement:

•You will act as the patient's eyes and ears. Get a notebook. Write down the patient's name, hospital room, the physicians' and primary nurses' names and contact information, the patient's diagnosis and treatment plan.

•To prevent medication mistakes, write down the patient's medications and dosages. Describe the medication, the shape and color of pills, the names on the labels of bottles or IV bags. Create a detailed description, as labels and bottles can look alike. Make sure you recognize the medication when it is administered. If you don't, ask questions. Be assertive.

•To prevent patient name mistakes, check with each hospital staff member who either comes to pick up the patient for a procedure or who is to administer a treatment and match the patient's name and correct procedure. Repeat this checklist with each hospital staff person.

•To prevent surgery on the wrong body part, accompany the patient to the operating room and request to see the surgeon. Ask this doctor to write on the patient's body the correct site to be operated on and which surgery is to be performed.

•To prevent the spread of hospital-acquired infectious diseases, wash your hands. Ask every person who comes in contact with the patient, including the physicians and nurses, to wash their hands or put on a fresh pair of disposable gloves before touching the patient.

•Above all, try to be with the patient as much as possible. You don't want your loved one, who might be in pain, calling for a nurse who doesn't come. Patients with involved family members get more attention. For a short period of time, you will help facilitate this. You could save a life.

None of these is fail-safe. No hospital staff member is intentionally causing errors. But there is a drastic, nationwide nursing shortage; doctors are asked to see too many patients in too little time, and hospitals are under financial duress. Everyone is trying to do the best job they can. As a family member, you can do your part by contributing to everyone's goal: the health and well-being of the patient — your loved one.

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