When Doctors Don’t Listen
… and What Patients Can Do About It

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A true story ...

48 years old
Smoker, borderline HTN, sedentary
In the ED with chest pain

Jerry
Does diagnosis matter?

- Centuries-old debate over whether diagnosis or treatment is more important
- No one questions that the right treatment depends on the correct diagnosis
- Most of our quality measures assume that diagnosis is right in the first place

Misdiagnosis

- Incidence of misdiagnosis estimated to be 10% to 20%
- Among malpractice claims, diagnostic errors are the most common, most costly and most dangerous
- An estimated 500,000 missed diagnostic opportunities occur each year in the U.S. at primary care visits alone
- Schiff et al found that 28 percent of diagnostic errors reported anonymously by doctors were life-threatening or resulted in death or permanent disability
- Leape et al estimated that diagnostic errors account for 40,000 to 80,000 deaths per year
An “orphan” issue

- Largely unrepresented in the current quality framework
  - National Quality Strategy focuses almost exclusively on management
  - In IOM report *To Err Is Human*, the phrase *medication error* is used 70 times while *diagnostic error* occurs twice
- Lack of obvious solutions
  - Wrong-site surgery and wrong-dose medication errors are amenable to systems solutions (time-outs, computerized order entry, etc.)
  - Diagnostic errors seem intensely personal: the “system” appears to be the physician, and his or her own knowledge, skills, values, and behaviors
- General tendency to perceive that diagnostic errors are made by someone else (someone less careful or skillful!)

Lack of data

- No national or system-wide campaign to collect accurate data on diagnostic error
- Doctors often don't know they've gotten it wrong
- Diagnostic errors are a leading cause of malpractice litigation, but the vast majority do not result in legal action
- Difficulty understanding and measuring diagnostic errors
- Little evidence that decision-support tools actually reduce diagnostic error
Roots of the problem

- Growing complexity of medicine
- Increasing fragmentation of the health-care system
- Relentless time pressures
- Excessive reliance on electronic data
- Expensive, high-tech tests supplanting traditional hands-on skills of physical diagnosis
- Learning by algorithm rather than by time-honored apprenticeship model

Solutions

- Medical education
  - Interventions to improve physician knowledge and experience (simulation training, improved feedback)
  - Improve clinical reasoning and decision-making skills (critical thinking, meta-cognition training)
- Change in healthcare delivery systems
  - Financial incentives for safer, higher-quality diagnosis
- Patient-focused interventions
  - Improved communication: 80% (or more) of diagnosis is predicated upon patient history
Something patients can do ...

8 Pillars to Better Diagnosis

#1. Tell your whole story

- Provide narrative, not just a list of symptoms
- Use chronology and context
- Share your impressions
- Express your concerns
- Practice makes perfect
#2. Participate in your diagnosis

- Think of diagnosis as a journey rather than a destination
- Ask what your doctor is thinking
- Understand the concepts of “differential diagnosis” and “working diagnosis”

#3. Understand what tests are for

- Every test should be done for a specific reason
- Every test has potential harms
- Ask:
  - What are we looking for?
  - How will the results change things?
  - What are the alternatives?
#4. Get answers before you leave

- Come prepared with questions:
  - What is my diagnosis?
  - What can I expect?
  - What can I do to get better?
  - What are some warning signs to watch for?
  - If something doesn’t seem right, ask!

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Back to Jerry ...

Reassured about chest pain
Understands his cardiac risk
Motivated to improve his health
Conclusions

• Avoiding misdiagnosis is critical to quality outcomes
• Doctors cannot rely exclusively on technology or algorithmic reasoning
• Patients can and should be encouraged to take an active role in the diagnostic process

References


Questions?

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