

AAAS NEWS & NOTES

edited by DIANA PARSELL

Groups Seek to Reduce Errors in Health Care

At a pioneering conference convened this month by AAAS and several other groups, two leading health care organizations announced initiatives aimed at enhancing patient safety and preventing controllable errors that occur during medical care and treatment.

As the conference, "Examining Errors in Health Care," opened on 13 October, the American Medical Association (AMA) said it will establish a National Patient Safety Foundation to promote collaborative error-reduction efforts in the health care community. Nancy Dickey, M.D., chair of the AMA Board of Trustees, said, "In today's health care environment, we are all accountable and must work together."

At the same time, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) announced that it will implement an "accreditation watch" policy for the thousands of institutions nationwide that it monitors and certifies for quality assurance. Under the new policy, JCAHO will "flag" an institution if on-site evaluation reveals an incident of patient death or serious injury that may have been prevented; the institution must then conduct a thorough analysis of how the incident happened and implement systematic changes to prevent future occurrences.

"No one, be it an individual or an organization, is immune to errors, but we believe strongly that accreditation must become an increasingly effective risk-reduction activity," said the president of JCAHO, Dennis O'Leary, M.D.

The AMA and JCAHO co-sponsored the conference, along with AAAS and the Annenberg Center for Health Sciences, which is based at Eisenhower Memorial Hospital in Rancho Mirage, California. The Annenberg Center hosted the event,

which drew more than 300 participants who included medical practitioners, researchers, health care managers, lawyers, ethicists, patient advocacy representatives, and safety experts from a variety of sectors.

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—Lucian Leape

AAAS's Scientific Freedom, Responsibility, and Law Program helped organize the 3-day conference. More than 50 presentations covered a wide range of topics related to health care errors, including education and training of personnel, communication strategies, legal issues, human and organizational factors, and the occurrence and reduction of errors in specific areas such as diagnosis, medication, and anesthesia. One panel

focused on an actual case of medical error to highlight the emotional, legal, ethical, and professional issues that arise from an incident that has tragic consequences.

AAAS senior program associate Deborah Runkle said one major focus of the conference was that the health care community might learn lessons about safety and error reduction from other high-risk sectors, such as aviation, industrial engineering, and nuclear power. Among the speakers, for example, were John Nance, an airline captain and aviation lawyer who serves as a correspondent for ABC television, and sociologist Diane Vaughan of Boston College, whose book *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture and Deviance at NASA* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

In his keynote address, Lucian Leape, M.D., of the Harvard School of Public Health echoed a central theme of the conference by calling for health care institutions to shift their focus in error prevention from

punishing people to correcting systems. He noted that although much is known about how to decrease errors, "hospitals have been locked into a 'crime and punishment' approach ... that is directed at individuals instead of the real root causes of errors—faulty systems."

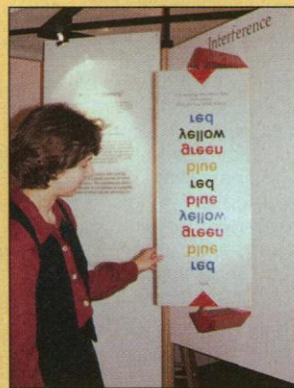
Leape, a former pediatric surgeon who has written and lectured widely on errors in medicine, also is leading an error-prevention initiative for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement. He hailed the conference as a much needed forum "to get people to talk to one another and then go home and implement proven remedies." The sponsoring organizations said they expected the conference to generate recommendations about actions that various segments of the health care industry could adopt to reduce errors.

For more information, visit the conference Web site at <http://www.mederrors.org> or contact Deborah Runkle at AAAS, by phone at 202-326-6794 or by e-mail at: drunkle@aaas.org.

A Window on Ourselves and Others

Do people in different cultures have the same emotions? What's the value of daydreams? And how do young children understand the world around them? Visitors to AAAS can explore these and other aspects of human behavior in an interactive exhibit now installed at the new headquarters building in downtown Washington, D.C.

"Psychology: It's More Than You Think!" is part of a larger traveling exhibition developed by the American Psychological Association (a AAAS affiliate) and the Ontario Science Center. The activities—many designed for two people—give insight into concepts such as language and communication, cooperation versus competition, imagi-



Lesson on interference. In a demonstration of the "Stroop effect," both ink color and meaning affect a viewer's perception of words.

nation, gender bias, and personality traits. Some explain tools and methods of psychological research, such as the display on PET (positron emission tomography) images and how they record internal brain activity.

The free exhibit is the first of many educational displays that will be featured in specially designed public spaces of the AAAS building at 1200 New York Avenue NW. Local volunteers are needed to help school groups and other visitors enjoy and learn from the psychology exhibit. If you live in the Washington area and

want to volunteer, call Jane Privé at 202-326-6786 or send an e-mail message to Jerry Bell at: jbelle@aaas.org.