

Reducing Diagnostic Error | Health Care Organizations

Ten Things I Could Do Tomorrow

Background

Diagnosis is the first step in addressing any new patient complaint or concern, and typically the diagnostic process is completed efficiently and accurately. Diagnostic errors, when they occur, derive from the complexity of the diagnostic process itself — from minor flaws in our health care systems, and from the inherent limitations of clinical reasoning.

Although we now have a basic understanding of how diagnostic errors arise, we know very little about how to prevent them. A wide range of interventions have been proposed, but very few have been formally evaluated.¹⁻⁷ Until the science of error prevention catches up with the need that exists, the best we can do is adopt common-sense steps that address the most common and important factors known to contribute to diagnostic error and harm. The list that follows presents initial suggestions, acknowledging that diagnosis involves not just the patient and the physician, but other members of the health care team and the practice environment.

1. Learn from diagnostic errors: Find them, study them, and discuss them. Feature diagnostic errors in Grand Rounds and M&M discussions.
2. Close the loop on diagnostic test results. Send results to patients. Monitor how many critical test results are acted upon within 30 days.
3. Empower and educate your patients to become partners in diagnosis.
4. Encourage accurate problem lists, and a differential diagnosis.
5. Establish ways for providers to receive feedback on their diagnoses.
6. Encourage and facilitate second opinions.
7. Improve staff communication and personal interaction.
8. Provide clinicians with diagnosis-specific decision-support tools: DXplain, Isabel, VisualDX, Up-to-Date.
9. Promote an atmosphere conducive to optimal diagnosis: Allow adequate time to evaluate new patients; minimize distractions.
10. Empower nurses to become involved in improving diagnosis. Monitor for new or resolving symptoms, ensure tests get done, and facilitate communication between patients and providers.

References

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