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. 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. Know the major diagnoses of your patients.
2. Be the voice of your patients and their advocate in navigating their health care.
3. Be the eyes of the diagnostic team in detecting, reporting, and documenting changes in your patients' symptoms, signs, complaints, or conditions.
4. Be the monitor of the diagnostic team. Is your patient responding to treatment as expected?
5. Help optimize communication between your patient and the care team:
   a. Help patients tell their story and relate all of their symptoms.
   b. Check patients' understanding of their diagnosis and what they've been told.
6. Be the watchdog for appropriate care coordination.
7. Educate patients about the diagnostic process.
8. Learn about how diagnostic errors arise and how they can be avoided.
9. Educate patients about diagnostic tests and explain why they are needed, what the patient will experience, and what the results will reveal.
10. Help patients with the emotional and psychological difficulties that arise when the diagnosis is not yet known, or is known to be bad.

References