

The most frequent error in medicine

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The most frequent error in medicine seems to occur nearly one out of three times a patient is referred to a specialist. A new study found that nearly a third of patients age 65 and older referred to a specialist are not scheduled for appointments and therefore do not receive the treatment their primary care doctor intended.

According to a new study appearing in the February 2010 issue of the *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*, only 71 percent of [patients](#) age 65 or older who are referred to a specialist are actually scheduled to be seen by that physician. Furthermore, only 70 percent of those with an appointment actually went to the specialist's office. Thus, only 50 percent (70 percent of 71 percent) of those referred to a specialist had the opportunity to receive the treatment their primary care doctor intended them to have, according to the findings by researchers from the Regenstrief Institute and the Indiana University School of Medicine.

The Institute of Medicine, in its seminal report "To Err is Human," defines a medical error as a "wrong plan" or a failure of a planned action to be completed.

"Patients fail to complete referrals with specialists for a variety of reasons, including those that the [health care system](#) can correct, such as failure of the primary care doctor's office to make the appointment; failure of the specialist's office to receive the request for a consultation—which can be caused by something as simple as a fax machine without paper - or a failure to confirm availability with the patient," said Michael Weiner M.D., M.P.H., first author of the study.

"There will always be reasons - health issues or lack of transportation, for example - why a referred patient cannot make it to the specialist he or she needs, but there are many problems we found to be correctable using health information technology to provide more coordinated and patient-focused care. Using [electronic medical records](#) and other health IT to address the malfunction of the referral process, we were able to reduce the 50 percent lack of completion of referrals rate to less than 20 percent, a significant decrease in the medical error rate," said Dr. Weiner.

The JECP study followed 6,785 [primary care](#) patients seen at an urban medical institution, all over age 65, with a mean age of 72. Nearly all (91 percent) of the patients were covered by Medicare.

"This is not necessarily the fault of patients or doctors alone, but it may take both working together - along with their health system - to correct this problem. Our study highlights how enormous a problem this is for patients who were not getting the specialized care they needed. Although our findings would likely differ among institutions, unfortunately overall trends are similar in other parts of the country" said Dr. Weiner.

Provided by Indiana University School of Medicine

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