

## Is The Healthcare Industry Squandering Its Good Will?

Over the years the pharmaceutical, biotechnology and health care industries have built a tremendous amount of good will for accomplishments both inside and outside of its research labs. Indeed the industry is to be commended for medical advances that have almost single handedly contributed to increased life expectancy from 47 years old for men and 48 years old for women in 1900 to 77 and 78 respectively today. Continued advances fuel predictions that longevity will increase beyond the current 30 years gain.

In addition the industries' ongoing contributions to charitable care and coverage, safety net partnerships and general community benefit has earned accolades from patients, elected officials and community leaders.

That is why it is alarming to see the rash of finger pointing surrounding ongoing and increasing reports of questionable drug safety, medication errors and hospital dumping allegations.

With disturbing regularity articles are appearing in the nation's newspapers about how another drug company or health care provider has violated the public trust in the above ways.

When it comes to medications and safety, hospitals say drug companies should do more such as packaging more pills individually, discontinue free drug samples to doctors and disclose the results of all clinical trials involving their drugs.

Others say hospitals are to blame for delays in adopting electronic medical records and more systemic changes such as electronic prescribing. The head of one major Consumer advocacy groups says just about everyone in the health system is to blame. While certainly adopting systemic changes may help, the reality is that the majority of the errors can be traced back to some form of human error – and thereby are doubly fixable.

While most experimentation in the drug development and treatment process can be readily accepted and understood by an appreciative society, the seeming disregard for controllable patient safety and well being is not as easily understood or forgiven.

ABC news reported in April 2007 that 3% of hospital patients experience errors in treatment and 25% of those errors result in death. The same story reported that 1.16 million preventable patient injuries occurred over a 3 year period and 247,000 people died from potentially preventable problems. It is unscionable that with the technology we have today we cannot get the right pill from the first floor pharmacy to the 5<sup>th</sup> floor. This is a solvable problem. Universal health care may not be solvable, but getting people the right pill in the world we live in now should be a solvable problem.

And what is being done to regain the public trust? Is it possible that a drug company can lose public trust and still maintain viability and continue to make the advances achieved

to date? In my seventeen years of work in the health care industry I have not seen this level of criticism and lack of trust by what is traditionally a grateful public. Since the 1922 discovery and development of insulin transformed diabetes from a rapid death sentence to a chronic disease, confidence swelled in the industry's ability to provide drugs and care that would keep us well for the rest of our lives. I have met and heard heart-rending stories of grateful patients who are benefiting from continued advances. And for years, I worked side by side with dedicated employees who deemed their greater purpose in life as finding better treatments and ultimately cures for serious and life threatening illnesses.

Born out of this dedication and gratitude I have worked with others in the industry to create community benefit and public health programs including: an insurance plan for children in low-income families; safety programs to reduce violence among at risk youth; co-pay assistance for those struggling to pay their share for prescriptions; and a public-private partnership to increase the enrollment of people of color and women in clinical trials.

While the industry's generosity in funding such programs is to be commended, its attitude about the recent revelations is as dangerous as some of the publicized side effects of its therapies and actions. Physicians, health care professionals and even company employees are furious about the response to drug safety concerns and the black eye it is giving some of the same companies who delivered this century's medical advances.

If this defensiveness and lack of accountability continues, the 100 years of health care victory could turn to dross. Hypothetically, is it conceivable that if one out of every four cars a company made has a defect that results in killing the occupant, people will continue to purchase that brand?

Instead of solely fighting to protect its revenue stream the industry should be focusing on regaining everyone's trust. What is needed is a marriage of faith with patients and providers again. The problem can be solved only if we admit we have the problem.

The challenge is to integrate all that has been accomplished in the health care arena and deliver it correctly. For example, what a tremendous boost to public confidence it would be if health care organizations commit to crack down on medical errors and demonstrate accountability by reporting on its website how well it is doing once or twice every year. Drug companies can demonstrate the same accountability by issuing similar reports on drug safety information.

The health care industry must move immediately to restore public confidence by not only continuing its research, development and focus on evidence based solutions to patient care, but by also being transparent in reporting all it is doing to correct solvable problems such as medical errors, patient dumping and drug safety. Stepping up to this plate in addition to all of the other plates already being addressed - such as making sure patients have access to therapies via free drug programs, addressing disparities in health care among underserved populations and creating safety net community partnerships – will

take a giant step in rebuilding public faith. We cannot allow a century of almost unbridled success to be squandered away by sweeping problems under the rug in an industry that holds so much more potential to improve lives by increasing health and longevity.

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