

KAISER PUBLIC OPINION SPOTLIGHT

Kaiser Public Opinion Spotlights provide in-depth analysis of public opinion on a variety of health care and health policy topics. Each Spotlight uses public opinion data from Kaiser surveys and other sources to examine current views and trends.

Updated: January 2006

Public Opinion on Medical Errors

Priorities

Nearly half the public say they are very concerned about an error resulting in injury happening to themselves or their family when they receive health care in general (47%), and when they go to a hospital for care (47%). These concerns rank higher than concern about error resulting in injury when flying on commercial airlines* (32%) and when purchasing food at the supermarket (30%). However, when asked to choose what they worry about most with their own health care, being the victim of a medical mistake (7%) ranks lower than not being able to afford long-term care (27%), insurance refusing to cover treatment (23%), and their doctor not being covered under a new plan (14%).

While the public reports being concerned about the issue of medical errors, prevention of medical errors is not something that ranks highest in the public's open-ended responses to questions about the top problems facing health care and medicine (a list which is topped by the cost of care and prescription drugs, insurance company issues, and access to health care).

Personal experience with medical errors

After being read a common definition of medical errors, about one-third of Americans (34%) report that they have been personally involved in a situation where a preventable medical error was made in their own care or that of a family member. On a comparison survey of physicians, a similar share (35%) of physicians report the same. One might be concerned about the potential for over-reporting of medical errors among the public. However, the fact that the public's and physicians' reported experiences are nearly identical is reassuring, since physicians are likely to be in a more informed position to evaluate the care that they or their family members have received.

Perceptions about medical errors

About a third of the public says that preventable medical errors occur often – both in general (7% “very” often, 29% “somewhat” often), and in their own care (8% “often”, 26% “sometimes”). However, the public is more likely to believe that medical errors are an infrequent occurrence in their own care than in care *in general* - 22% say their own health care providers “never” make mistakes in treating them, whereas just 8% say that, *in general*, medical errors happen “not often at all”.

Many people harbor misconceptions about the number of deaths caused by medical errors. About half (49%) of the public believe that 5,000 deaths or fewer occur in

hospitals each year due to preventable medical errors. This number is far lower than either the high or the low estimates in the 1999 report on medical errors from the Institute of Medicine.

Causes and solutions

When given a list of nine possible causes of preventable medical errors, at least half the public sees seven of these causes as very important. When further asked to choose between mistakes made by health professionals and those made by health care institutions as a more important cause of medical errors, a majority of the public (52%) chooses mistakes made by individuals. This is contrast to the belief by most experts in this field that systems, rather than individuals, are responsible for the majority of preventable medical errors.

The public sees value in many different proposed solutions to prevent medical errors. One area where there is a substantial difference between the views of physicians and those of the public is on public reporting of medical errors. While the public sees mandatory reporting as a very effective way of reducing errors and wants these reports to be publicly available, physicians believe that such reports be kept confidential.

** Note: This survey was conducted before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.*

1: Worry about Medical Errors Compared with Other Concerns

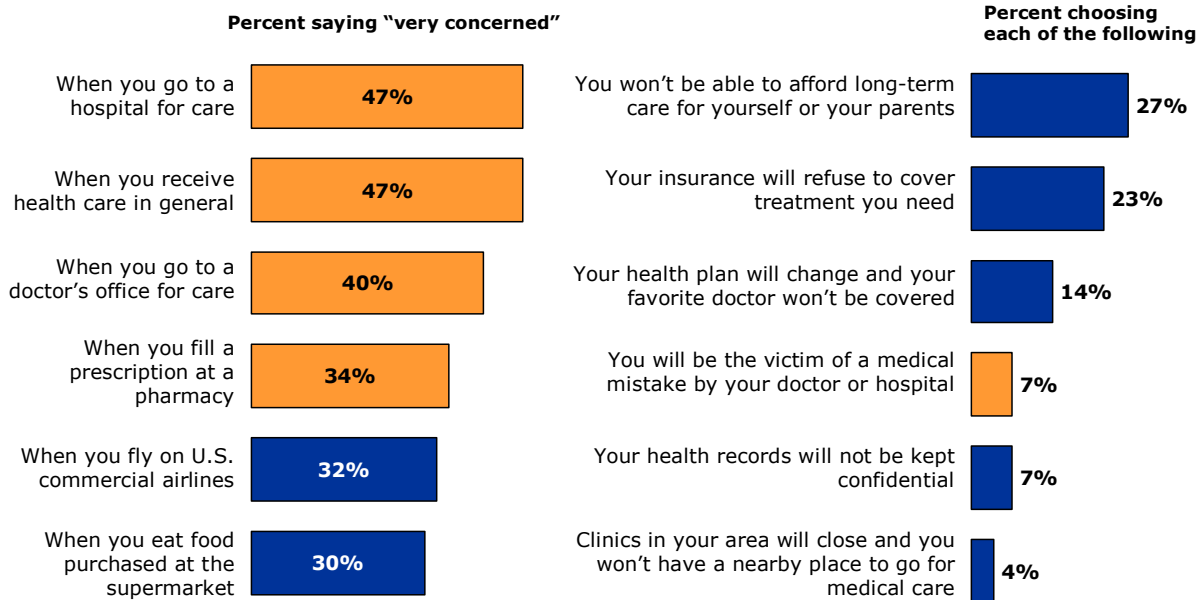
Nearly half the public says they are very concerned about an error resulting in injury happening to themselves or their family when they receive health care in general (47%), and when they go to a hospital for care (47%). Somewhat fewer say they are very concerned about errors resulting in injury when they go to the doctor’s office (40%) and fill a prescription (34%). These concerns rank higher than concerns about error resulting in injury when flying on commercial airlines* (32%) and when purchasing food at the supermarket (30%). When it comes to what they worry about most with their own health care, being the victim of a medical mistake (7%) ranks lower than not being able to afford long-term care (27%), insurance refusing to cover treatment (23%), and their doctor not being covered under a new plan (14%).

* Note: this survey was conducted before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Worry about Medical Errors Compared with Other Concerns

Please tell me how concerned, if at all, you are about a serious error or mistake leading to injury or harm happening to you or your family in each of the following situations...

Which one of the following do you personally worry about the most when it comes to health care...



Source: Kaiser / Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality *An Update on the Role of Quality Information Survey* (conducted July 31 – October 13, 2000).

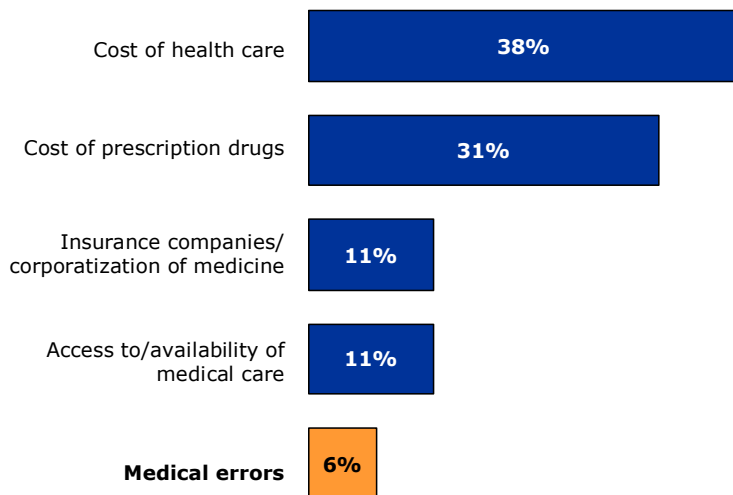
Source: NBC/Wall St. Journal Poll (conducted Jun 18-Jun21, 1998)

2: Where Medical Errors Rank Relative to Other Problems Facing Health Care and Medicine

The prevention of medical errors has long been of concern to health professionals. While the public also reports concern over the issue, prevention of medical errors is not something that ranks highest in the public's open-ended responses to questions about the top problems facing health care and medicine. While only 6% of the public say medical errors are one of the two main problems facing health care and medicine in the U.S., nearly four in ten (38%) say cost of health care, and about three in ten (31%) say cost of prescription drugs are among the top concerns.

Where Medical Errors Rank Relative to Other Problems Facing Health Care and Medicine

Thinking about everything that has to do with health care and medicine, what do you think are the two main problems facing health care and medicine in the United States today? (open-ended Apr-02)



Source: Harvard School of Public Health / Kaiser Family Foundation *Medical Errors: Practicing Physician and Public Views*, Published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* December 12, 2002 (surveys conducted April-July 2002)

3: Priority of Reducing Medical Errors in Context with Other Health Issues

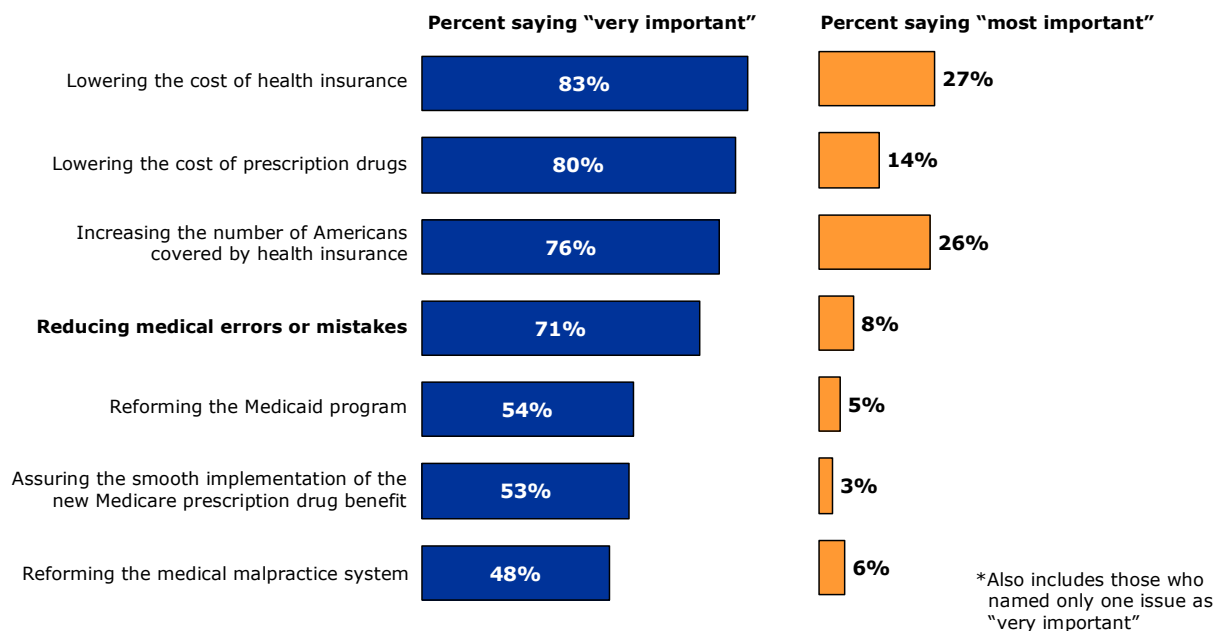
In contrast to their open-ended responses, when given a list of options a majority of the public (71%) thinks that reducing medical errors should be a “very” important priority for the nation’s health agenda. This ranks in the middle of a list of priorities – above reforming the Medicaid program (54%) and assuring the smooth implementation of the new Medicare prescription drug benefit (53%), but below cost concerns such as “lowering the cost of health insurance” (83%) and prescription drugs (80%) and below “increasing the number of Americans covered by health insurance” (76%).

When asked to choose, just 8% say reducing medical errors should be the MOST important priority for the President and Congress.

Priority of Reducing Medical Errors in Context with Other Health Issues

Now, I’m going to read you some different health care issues. As I read each one, please tell me how important you think it is for the President and Congress to deal with this issue – very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not important at all.

When forced to choose... Which of the following issues you say are very important do you think is **most** important?*



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation *Health Poll Report Survey* (conducted December 6–11, 2005)

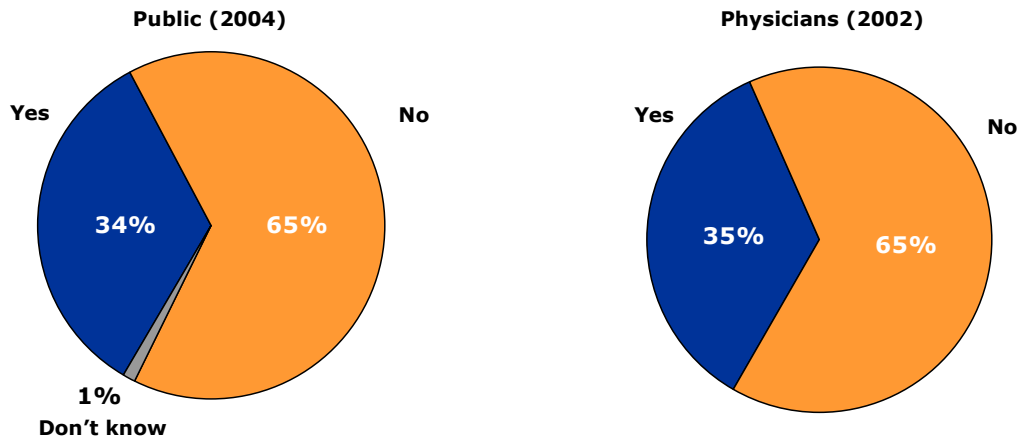
4: Personal Experiences with Medical Errors

After being read a common definition of medical errors, about one-third of Americans (34%) report that they have been personally involved in a situation where a preventable medical error was made in their own care or that of a family member. On a comparison survey of physicians in 2002, a similar share (35%) report that they have been personally involved in a situation where a preventable medical error was made in their own care or that of a family member.

One might be concerned about the potential for over-reporting of medical errors among the public. However, the fact that the public's and physicians' reported experiences are nearly identical is reassuring, since physicians are likely to be in a more informed position to evaluate the care that they or their family members have received.

Personal Experiences with Medical Errors

Have you ever been personally involved in a situation where a preventable medical error was made in your own medical care or that of a family member?*



*Respondents were read the following definition of medical errors: "Sometimes when people are ill and receive medical care, mistakes are made that result in serious harm, such as death, disability, or additional or prolonged treatment. These are called medical errors. Some of these errors are preventable, while others may not be."

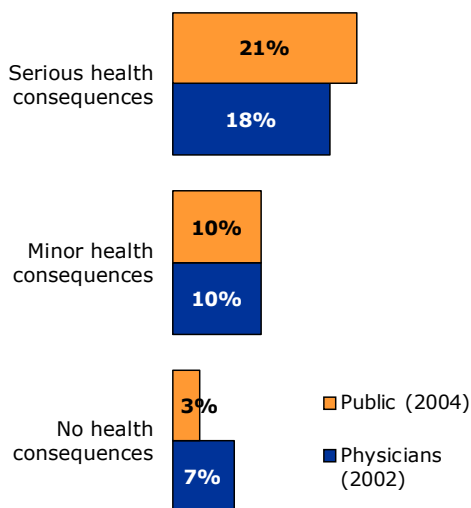
Source: Kaiser Family Foundation surveys

5: Personal Experiences: Health Consequences of Medical Errors

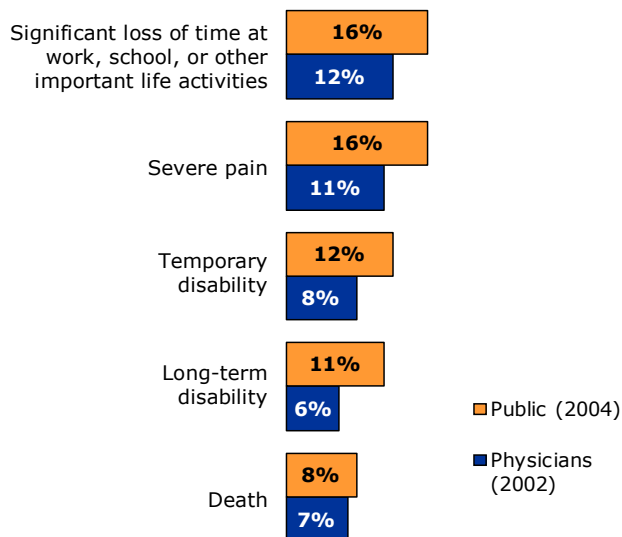
Significant percentages of both the public and physicians report having experience with medical errors that resulted in serious consequences. About one in five adults (21%) and physicians (18%) say an error caused "serious health consequences," including death (reported by 8% of the public and 7% of physicians), long-term disability (11% and 6%, respectively) or severe pain (16% and 11%, respectively).

Personal Experiences: Health Consequences of Medical Errors

Percent saying they or a member of their family experienced a medical error that resulted in...*



Percent saying they or a member of their family experienced a medical error with serious health consequences that resulted in...*



*Respondents were read the following definition of medical errors: "Sometimes when people are ill and receive medical care, mistakes are made that result in serious harm, such as death, disability, or additional or prolonged treatment. These are called medical errors. Some of these errors are preventable, while others may not be."

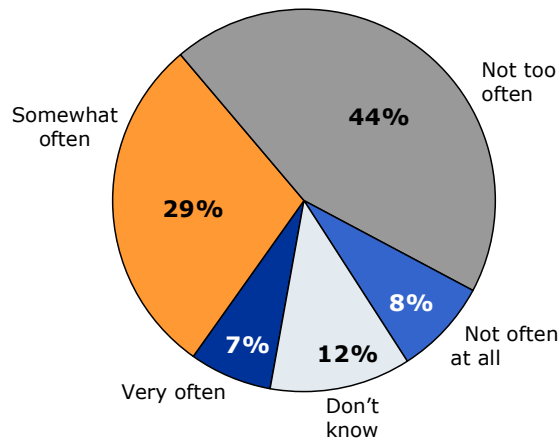
Source: Kaiser Family Foundation surveys

6: Perceived Frequency of Medical Errors

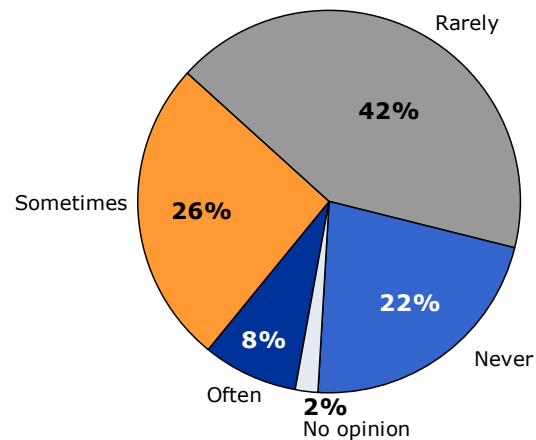
About a third of the public says that preventable medical errors occur often – both in general (7% “very” often, 29% “somewhat” often), and in their own care (8% “often”, 26% “sometimes”). However, The public is more likely to believe that medical errors are an infrequent occurrence in their own care than in care *in general* - 22% say their own health care providers “never” make mistakes in treating them, whereas just 8% say that, *in general*, medical errors happen “not often at all”.

Perceived Frequency of Preventable Medical Errors

When people seek help from a health professional, how often do you think preventable medical errors are made in their care?*(Jul-04)



Generally speaking, how often would you say that the doctors, hospitals and other components of the medical system you come in contact with make mistakes in diagnosing and treating **your medical problems**? (Mar-00)



*Respondents were read the following definition of medical errors: “Sometimes when people are ill and receive medical care, mistakes are made that result in serious harm, such as death, disability, or additional or prolonged treatment. These are called medical errors. Some of these errors are preventable, while others may not be.”

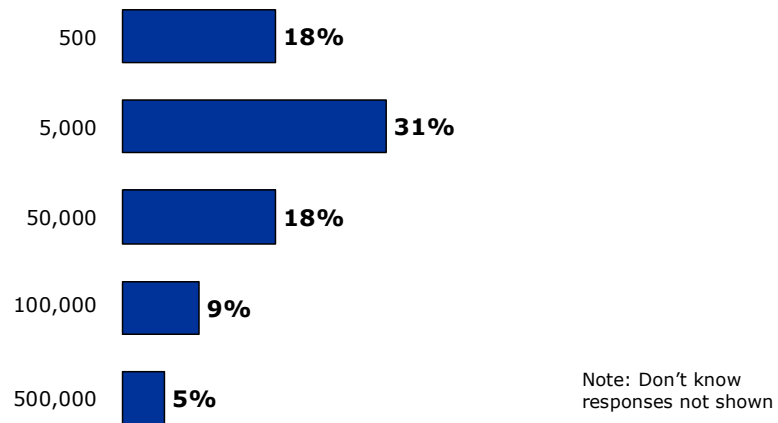
Source: Kaiser Family Foundation surveys

7: Perceived Frequency of Deaths Due to Medical Errors

About half of the public (49%) believes that 5,000 deaths or fewer occur in hospitals each year due to preventable medical errors. This number is far lower than either the high or the low estimates in the 1999 report on medical errors from the Institute of Medicine. (The IOM estimated this number is between 44,000 and 98,000 people).

Perceived Frequency of Deaths Due to Medical Errors

About how many Americans, do you think, die in hospitals each year as a result of a preventable medical error?*



*Respondents were read the following definition of medical errors: "Sometimes when people are ill and receive medical care, mistakes are made that result in serious harm, such as death, disability, or additional or prolonged treatment. These are called medical errors. Some of these errors are preventable, while others may not be."

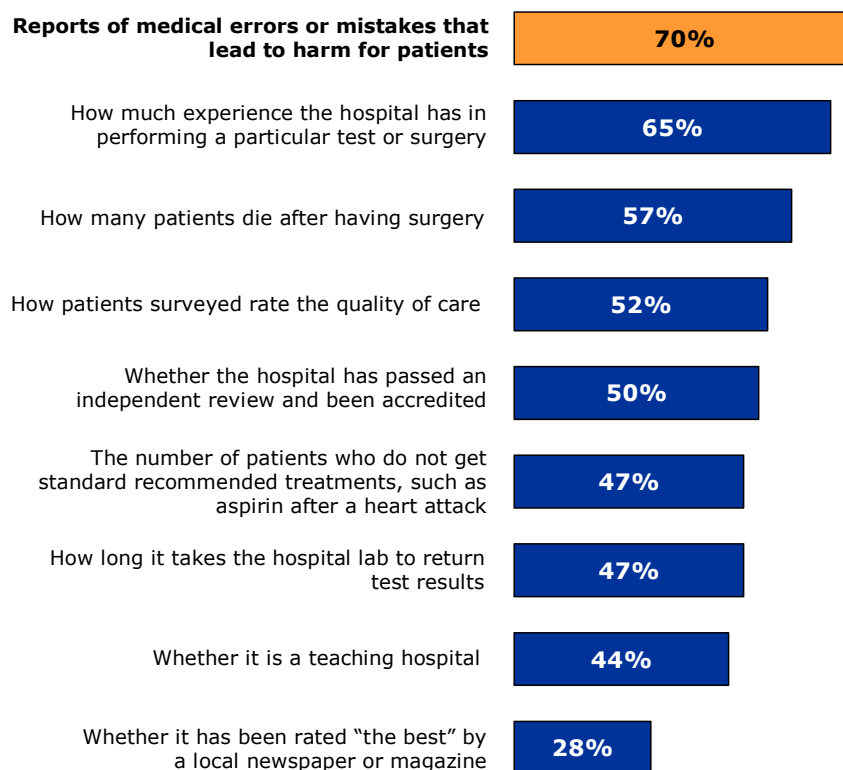
Source: Kaiser Family Foundation / Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality / Harvard School of Public Health *National Survey on Consumers' Experiences with Patient Safety and Quality Information*, November 2004 (conducted July 7 – September 5, 2004).

8: Medical Errors and Other Factors as Indicators of Quality of Care

When it comes to different indicators of hospital quality, people most often say that reports of medical errors or mistakes tell a lot about the quality of a hospital (70%). This ranked higher than other indicators such as how much experience the hospital has in particular tests or surgeries (65%), how many patients die after surgery (57%), patient surveys of quality of care (52%), and whether the hospital had passed independent review (50%). Fewer than half said that one could tell a lot about the quality of a hospital based on the number of patients who don't get standard recommended treatments (47%), how long it takes the hospital to return test results (47%), whether it's a teaching hospital (44%), and whether it was rated highly by local newspapers and magazines (28%).

Medical Errors and Other Factors as Indicators of Quality of Care

Percent saying each would tell them "a lot" about the **quality of hospitals**...



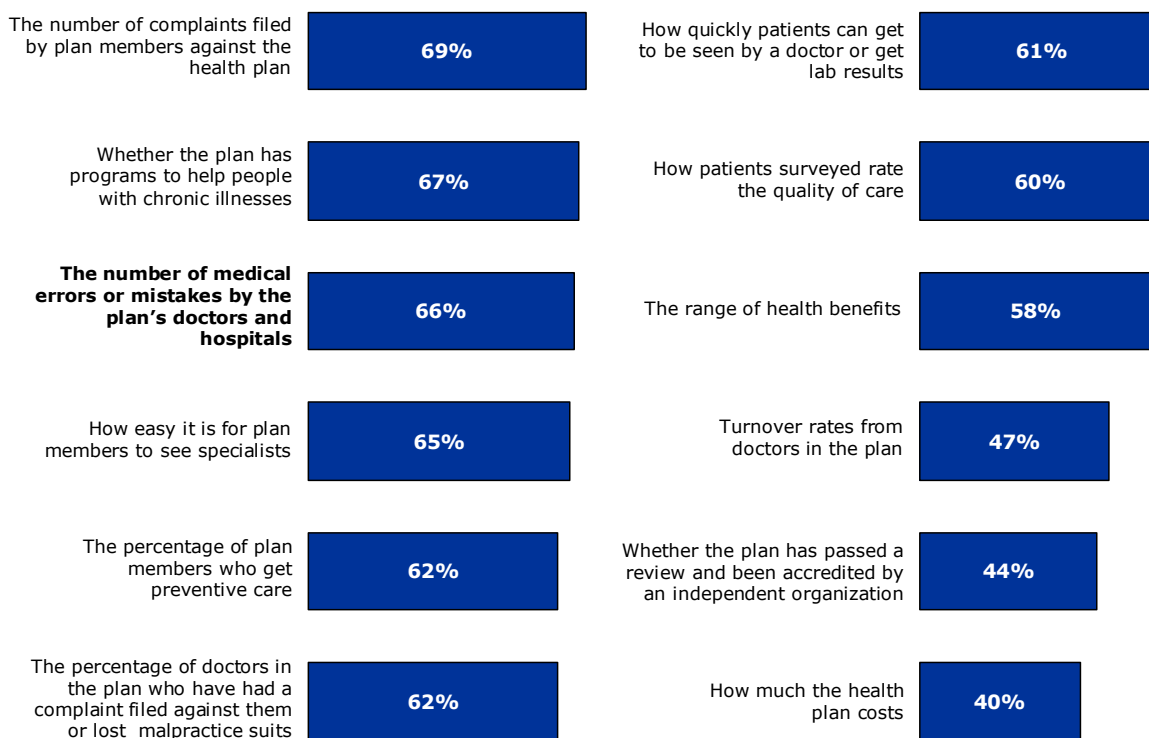
Source: Kaiser Family Foundation / Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality / Harvard School of Public Health *National Survey on Consumers' Experiences with Patient Safety and Quality Information*, November 2004 (conducted July 7 – September 5, 2004).

9: Medical Errors and Other Factors as Indicators of Health Plan Quality

When it comes to evaluating health plan quality, the number of medical errors made by the plan's doctors and hospitals ranks near the top of the list of indicators (66% say this tells them a lot about the quality of the plan).

Medical Errors and Other Factors as Indicators of Health Plan Quality

Percent who say each of the following tells them "a lot" about the quality of health plans...



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation / Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality / Harvard School of Public Health *National Survey on Consumers' Experiences with Patient Safety and Quality Information*, November 2004 (conducted July 7 – September 5, 2004).

10: Perceived Causes of Preventable Medical Errors

When given a list of nine items as possible causes of preventable medical errors, at least half of the public sees seven of these causes as very important. The top causes as viewed by the public are overwork, stress, or fatigue of health professionals (74%); physicians not having enough time with patients (70%); not enough nurses in the hospital (69%); and health professionals not working together or communicating as a team (68%). Interestingly, the lowest-ranking cause among the public, lack of computerized medical records (46%), is something that experts in this field often cite as a main cause of preventable errors.

Perceived Causes of Preventable Medical Errors

Percent saying each is a very important cause of preventable medical errors...



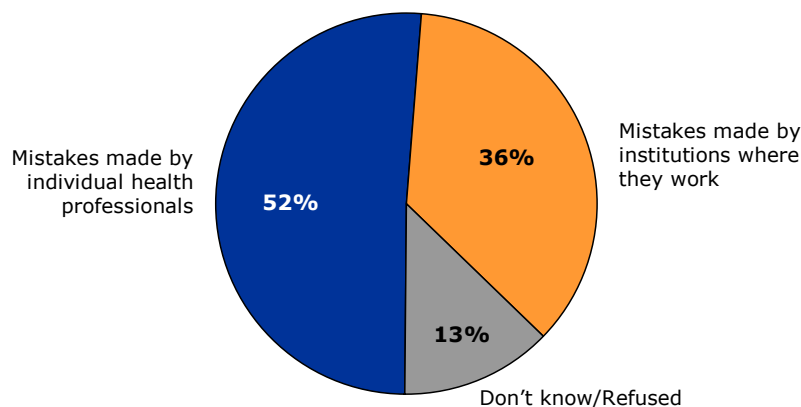
Source: Kaiser Family Foundation / Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality / Harvard School of Public Health *National Survey on Consumers' Experiences with Patient Safety and Quality Information*, November 2004 (conducted July 7 – September 5, 2004).

11: Responsibility for Preventable Medical Errors

When asked to choose between mistakes made by health professionals and those made by health care institutions as a more important cause of preventable medical errors, a majority of the public (52%) chooses mistakes made by individuals. This is in contrast to the belief by most experts in this field that systems, rather than individuals, are responsible for the majority of preventable medical errors.

Responsibility for Preventable Medical Errors

Which of the following do you think is the more important cause of preventable medical errors that result in serious harm?*



*Respondents were read the following definition of medical errors: "Sometimes when people are ill and receive medical care, mistakes are made that result in serious harm, such as death, disability, or additional or prolonged treatment. These are called medical errors. Some of these errors are preventable, while others may not be."

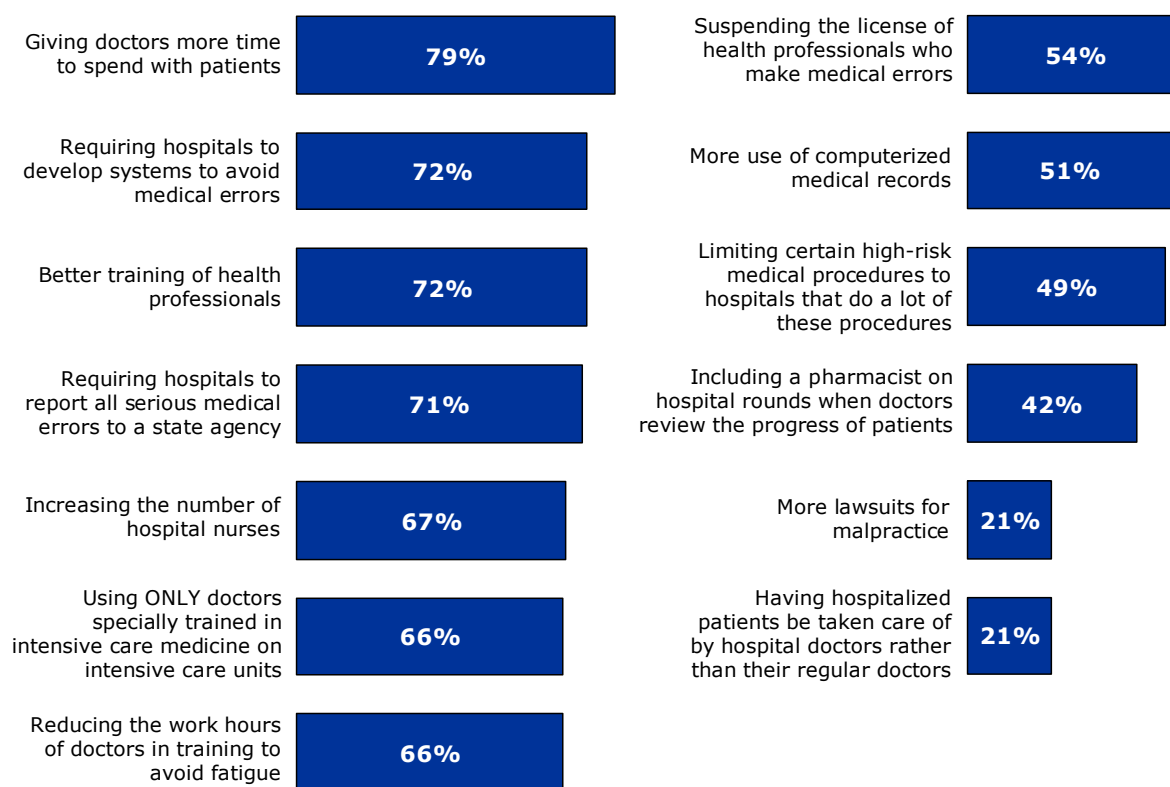
Source: Kaiser Family Foundation / Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality / Harvard School of Public Health *National Survey on Consumers' Experiences with Patient Safety and Quality Information*, November 2004 (conducted July 7 – September 5, 2004).

12: Possible Solutions to Prevent Medical Errors

When given a list of 13 proposed solutions to prevent medical errors, at least half the public rated nine of these items as very effective. The top four proposed solutions were giving physicians more time to spend with their patients (79%), requiring hospitals to develop systems to avoid errors (72%), better training of health professionals (72%) and requiring hospitals to report all serious medical errors (71%).

Possible Solutions to Prevent Medical Errors

Percentage who feel each solution would be very effective in reducing preventable medical errors...



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation / Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality / Harvard School of Public Health *National Survey on Consumers' Experiences with Patient Safety and Quality Information*, November 2004 (conducted July 7 – September 5, 2004).

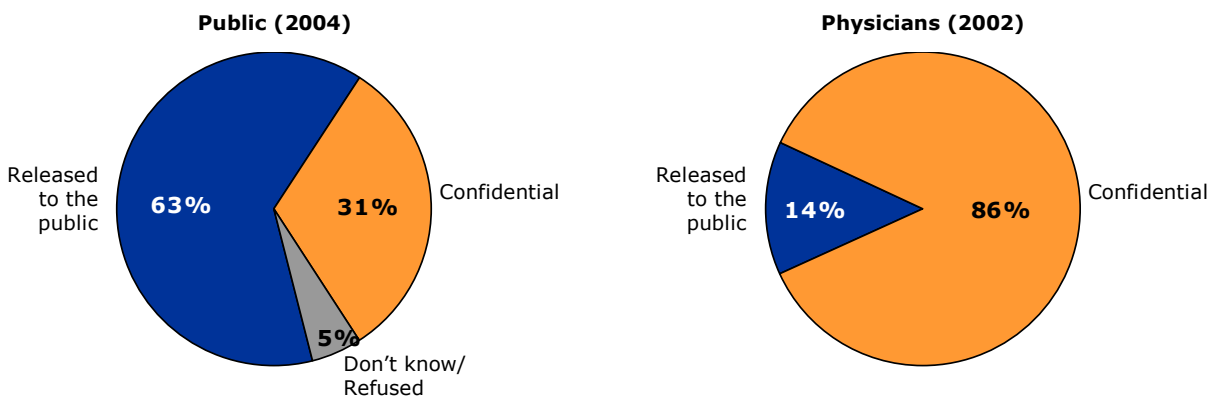
13: Reporting of Medical Errors

One area where there is a substantial difference between the views of physicians and those of the public is on public reporting of medical errors. The vast majority (92%) of the public says medical error reporting should be *required*; just 6% says it should be voluntary.

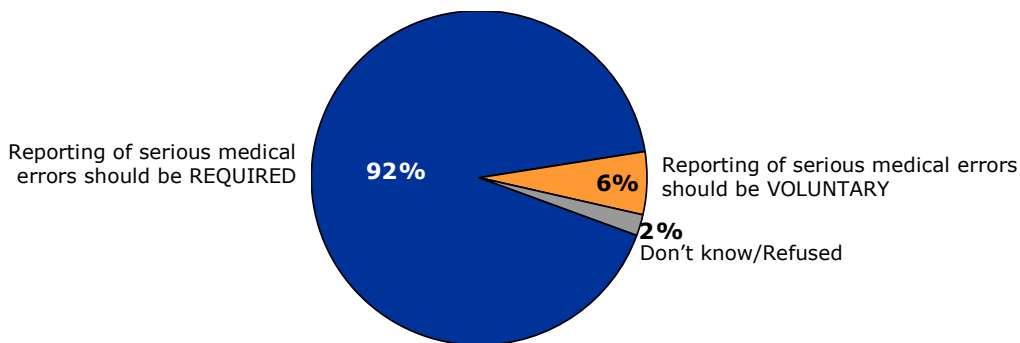
In 2004, more than six in ten (63%) of the public said that serious medical errors should be released to the public, while in 2000, 14% of physicians said the same. Physicians were much more likely than the public to say that reports of medical errors should be used to prevent future mistakes, but be confidential (86% of physicians, 31% of the public).

Reporting of Medical Errors

Should hospital reports of serious medical errors be confidential and only used to learn how to prevent future mistakes or should they also be released to the public?



Which one of the following statements comes closer to your views on how medical errors that result in serious injury or harm should be handled? (2004)



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation surveys

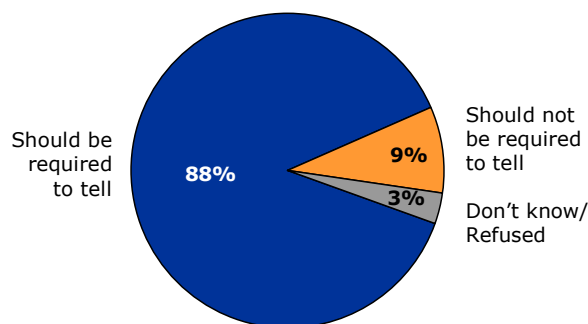
14: Trust in Doctors About Mistake Reporting

An overwhelming majority of the public (88%) says that physicians should be required to tell their patients if a mistake is made in their treatment. More than half of the public also says that they trust their own doctor to tell them if a mistake were made in their treatment (23% say their doctor would be “very” likely to tell them, and another 31% say it’s “somewhat” likely).

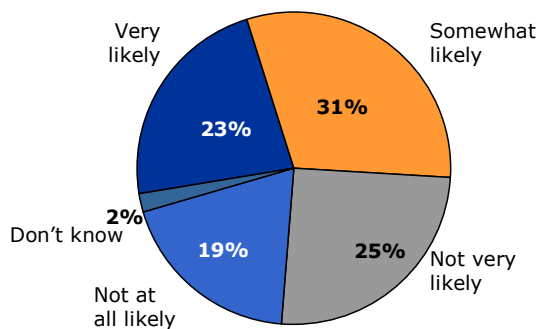
However, among those who report having personal experience with a preventable medical error (either themselves or in their family), fewer than three in ten (28%) say that the doctor or health professional involved told them about the mistake.

Trust in Doctors about Mistake Reporting

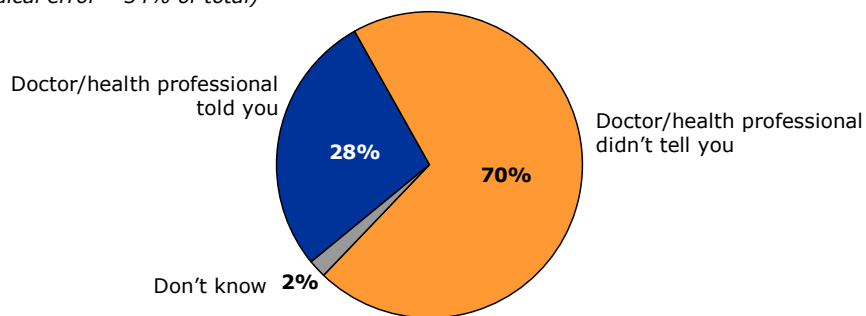
Should physicians be required to tell patients if a preventable medical error resulting in serious harm is made in their care, or not?



If a medical error were made in your care, how likely do you think the doctor would be to tell you?



Did the doctor or the health professionals involved tell you that a medical error had been made in your or your family member's treatment, or didn't they tell you? (Among those who reported that they or someone in their family experienced a medical error – 34% of total)



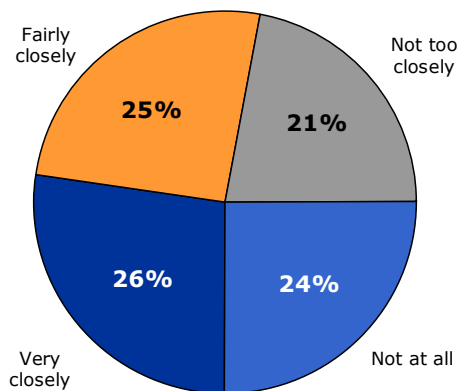
Source: Kaiser Family Foundation / Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality / Harvard School of Public Health *National Survey on Consumers' Experiences with Patient Safety and Quality Information*, November 2004 (conducted July 7 – September 5, 2004).

15: Attention to and Knowledge about Medical Error News

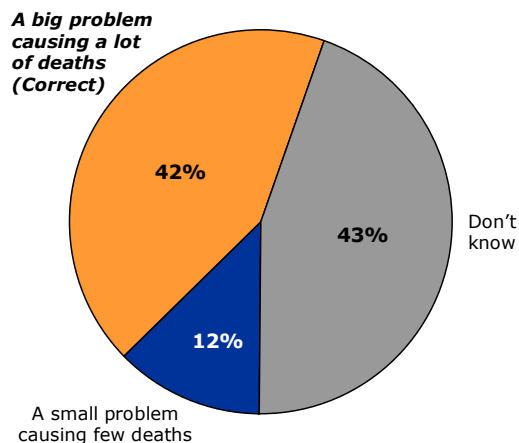
In 1999, the Institute of Medicine released a report about medical errors in hospitals. This was one of the most closely followed health policy news stories that year. More than half of the public (51%) said they followed the story closely (26% reported following this story very closely; 25% said they followed it fairly closely). Four in ten (42%) knew that the report indicated that medical errors are a serious problem, many resulting in a large number of preventable deaths. However, another 43% didn't know enough to say what the report was about, and 12% thought the news said it was a small problem.

Attention to and Knowledge about Medical Error News

How closely did you follow this story... a report by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences about medical errors in hospitals?



To the best of your knowledge, did this report say that these medical errors were...



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health *Survey on Health Care and the 2000 Elections* (conducted Dec. 3-13, 1999)