



Raymond C. Zastrow, MD

SMS working to improve patient safety

Raymond C. Zastrow, MD

‘Medical errors kill tens of thousands.’ When the Institute of Medicine released its startling report, “To Err is Human: Building a Safer Health System” in November 1999, headlines like this one resonated across the country. The study reported that up to 98,000 deaths occur annually in hospitals throughout the United States because of medical errors—not necessarily recklessness on the part of physicians, nurses and other health care providers, but basic flaws in the way hospitals, clinics and pharmacies operate.

Findings from the report have been questioned in subsequent studies, but the damage was done. Patient confidence in health care was shaken, and there was a public outcry to do something.

I’m proud to say the SMS is “doing something.” Patient safety is the theme of my presidency because as physicians, it’s our responsibility to be leaders in health care policy and practice.

So in May 2000, the SMS helped bring together a broad coalition of business and health trade associations, HMOs, and others dedicated to keeping

Wisconsin citizens healthy. From that first Patient Safety Forum, a working group was assembled to develop patient safety recommendations, which have since been shared with and adopted by several organizations across the state. (*Read more about the Wisconsin Patient Safety Institute and the recommendations on page 16.*) Funding has been secured and in August, the Wisconsin Patient Safety Institute, Inc. became an independent, non-profit organization that will assist physicians and other health care professionals in improving systems and finding meaningful ways to decrease medical errors.

SMS Executive Vice President John Patchett, JD, has played an integral role in the evolution of the Patient Safety Institute, as have many SMS members who participated in the initial working group. Mr. Patchett is currently serving as the Institute’s secretary/treasurer. They all deserve our thanks.

Of course this kind of patient advocacy is nothing new for the SMS. As physicians, we live by the credo “first, do no harm.” And the SMS has a long history of promoting best practices. In fact, SMS’s involvement in the patient safety issue was ensured by our core purpose: Advancing

the health of the people of Wisconsin. When research indicates that patients are dying every year because of medical errors, it’s our responsibility to do something or our mission is nothing more than a bunch of words on a piece of paper.

To ensure our purpose remains the center of our existence, we developed our strategic plan—the blueprint for everything we do. Our action in the area of patient safety provides an excellent example of how that blueprint works. The collaboration and leadership needed throughout the development of the Institute is a wonderful example of how we can be health policy leaders and patient advocates. Hopefully our effort with colleagues will help patients regain any of the trust that was lost when the IOM report was published. But, most importantly, our patients will be safer when they walk into our offices, enter a hospital, or fill a prescription.

I believe, perhaps ironically, that the IOM report provided a critical wakeup call for the healthcare community. Any preventable error that occurs in a hospital, clinic, or other health care setting is one too many. Working together we can, and we are, making a difference for our patients.

Doctor Zastrow is the SMS president. From Hartland, he specializes in anatomc and clinical pathology.



The mission of the *Wisconsin Medical Journal* is to provide a vehicle for professional communication and continuing education of Wisconsin physicians.

The *WMJ* (ISSN 1098-1861) is the official publication of the State Medical Society of Wisconsin and is devoted to the interests of the medical profession and health care in Wisconsin. The managing editor is responsible for overseeing the production, business operation and contents of *WMJ*. The editorial board, chaired by the medical editor, solicits and peer reviews all scientific articles; it does not screen public health, socioeconomic or organizational articles. Although letters to the editor are reviewed by the medical editor, all signed expressions of opinion belong to the author(s) for which neither the *WMJ* nor the SMS take responsibility. The *WMJ* is indexed in Index Medicus, Hospital Literature Index and Cambridge Scientific Abstracts.

For reprints of this article contact the *WMJ* Managing Editor at 800.362.9080 or e-mail wmj@wismed.org.

© 2001 State Medical Society of Wisconsin