Prioritising Patient Safety: A Call to Action for a Resilient European Health Union

Patient harm is not just a statistic; it represents real individuals whose lives have been adversely affected by preventable errors within healthcare systems. In Europe, this issue is significant, with statistics indicating that as many as one in every ten patients experience harm while receiving services in hospitals. Moreover, up to 40% of patients across OECD countries are estimated to be harmed while receiving care in primary and ambulatory care settings. These numbers are staggering and underscore the urgent need for concerted action at the European level to address patient safety as a critical public health concern. Members of the Alliance for the Digitalisation of hospital medication management pathways call for a European patient safety strategy.

Lethal Impact of Medication Errors in European Healthcare Systems

A crucial aspect of patient safety lies in the realm of medication errors, which continue to plague healthcare systems across Europe. Studies have shown that nearly 18% of European patients, equivalent to 80 million individuals, report experiencing significant harm from medication errors during hospitalisation. Shockingly, the mortality rate from medication errors surpasses that of road traffic accidents, breast cancer, or HIV-related deaths, highlighting the severity of this issue. Despite efforts to tackle medication errors, the lack of mandatory reporting in all EU Member States and undetected errors by patients or staff indicate that the true extent of harm may be even greater than reported. The financial burden of medication errors is substantial, with annual costs estimated to be as high as €43 billion, further emphasising the urgency of addressing this issue.

The Toll of Fatigue on Patient Safety

Fatigue and burnout among healthcare workers exacerbate patient safety risks, leading to compromised care quality and increased likelihood of medical errors. Research has demonstrated a clear link between healthcare worker fatigue and compromised patient safety outcomes. Overworked and understaffed teams not only result in delayed care but also contribute to medical errors and adverse patient outcomes. Moreover, burnout among healthcare professionals can lead to higher turnover rates, exacerbating the existing workforce shortage crisis and posing a threat to the continuity of healthcare services across Europe.

Staffing Struggles: The Critical Link Between Workforce Shortages and Patient Safety

The correlation between workforce shortages and patient safety risks is well-established. Studies have shown that staffing levels directly impact patient safety outcomes, with inadequate staffing leading to increased risks for adverse events. A study conducted in an acute NHS Trust in England identified numerous correlations between safety factors, physiological data, and staffing levels, highlighting the intricate relationship between workforce availability and patient safety. Addressing workforce shortages and improving working conditions for healthcare professionals are imperative steps towards enhancing patient safety across European healthcare systems.

Standardising Patient Safety Programmes and Embracing Digital Solutions

In addition to workforce-related challenges, disparities in patient safety outcomes persist across EU Member States. Standardising patient safety programmes and care delivery practices is crucial to mitigate these disparities and ensure equitable access to safe care for all patients. Investments in modern healthcare technologies and digital tools are also essential to prevent medication errors and improve overall safety in healthcare delivery. However, the lack of a common, overarching strategy to fund the upscale of digital systems in healthcare settings inhibits progress in reducing harm from medication errors. By prioritising investments in digital healthcare technologies, European policymakers can facilitate the transition towards safer and more efficient healthcare systems. Furthermore, establishing a comprehensive patient safety investigation framework is paramount to promote transparency, accountability, and learning from adverse events. A standardised approach to investigating patient safety incidents, involving all stakeholders, can help identify root causes and implement preventive measures to mitigate future occurrences. However, the absence of an agreed-upon approach to investigating patient safety incidents underscores the need for coordinated action at the European level.

Urgent Call to Action: Prioritising Patient Safety in the European Health Union

Despite the importance of patient safety, dedicated resources and consistent implementation of strategies to reduce harm have been lacking. The European Union has shown willingness to recognise patient safety as a priority through various policy initiatives, including recommendations on patient safety issued in 2009. However, the absence of a common European patient safety strategy and inconsistent implementation of patient safety actions highlight the need for renewed commitment and concerted action at the European level. Undersigned organisations call upon European policymakers at all levels to take immediate and concerted action to prioritise patient safety as a fundamental principle of the European Health Union:

1. Launch a European Patient Safety Strategy recognising the critical role of patient safety in building a responsive and resilient European Health Union.
2. Allocate dedicated resources for patient safety: Dedicate resources, including financial resources, for patient safety initiatives, ensuring that adequate funding is available to support the implementation of strategies that reduce patient harm.
3. Standardise patient safety programs: Work towards standardising patient safety programs and care delivery practices across all EU Member States to reduce disparities in patient safety outcomes.
4. Foster cultures of safety: Invest in initiatives that promote a culture of safety within healthcare organisations, fostering psychologically safe environments for healthcare professionals and patients alike.
5. Support the healthcare workforce: Address workforce shortages and improve working conditions for healthcare professionals, recognising that their well-being is closely tied to patient safety.
6. Promote the digital transition: Prioritise investments in modern healthcare technologies and digital tools that can help prevent medication errors and improve the overall safety of healthcare delivery.
7. Establish a comprehensive patient safety investigation framework: Develop a standardised framework for investigating patient safety incidents, ensuring it encompasses clear guidelines on when and how to conduct investigations. This framework should prioritise transparency, impartiality, and the involvement of patients and their families to promote learning and accountability in cases of significant harm.

Prioritising patient safety is essential to building a resilient European Health Union that prioritises the well-being of all citizens. By launching a European Patient Safety Strategy, European policymakers can significantly reduce patient harm and enhance the quality of care. Patient safety should not be a luxury; it should be a fundamental right for every individual seeking medical care in Europe. By embracing a collective commitment to patient safety, Europe can set a global standard for excellence in patient care and ensure that no patient suffers harm while receiving healthcare services.

Source: EHMA

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