

# body & mind



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## How to stay healthy in the healthcare system



By Lois Thornton

**W**hen my friend, Maha, was hospitalised for minor surgery, she didn't realise that her health and safety were at stake. Though the surgery was completed without incident, a breach in infection control protocols resulted in a nasty wound infection that took two weeks to resolve. On top of that, she had an allergic reaction to the antibiotic that was prescribed for the infection. Unfortunately, Maha's situation is not exceptional. As many as one in seven patients in hospitals experience the effects of some kind of medical error.

The issue of patient safety has been front and centre on the world health stage for more than two decades but even with global thinking resulting in a transformation in the way patient safety is viewed, safe patient care continues to be a source of great concern. Adverse effects from healthcare can range from hospital acquired infections, to complications of surgical interventions to medication errors. It is estimated that

costs to some countries of additional hospitalisation, litigation costs, lost income, disability and medical expenses are in excess of \$6bn per year. Isn't it ironic that the people and systems that are supposed to care for us also put us at the greatest risk?

It's not that healthcare professionals and systems are not trying to ensure the safest care to patients. Quality improvement and patient safety measures are a top priority for hospitals and clinics. Healthcare systems, however, are large and very complex and are rife for human error. And accidents do happen even under the best circumstances. So what is a healthcare consumer to do to ensure a safe journey through the healthcare system?

The responsibility cannot be left entirely with those providing care. Healthcare consumers are at least partially responsible for ensuring that the care that they receive is effective, safe and meets their individual needs. When patients become complete partners with their healthcare providers, proactively joining in their treatment by becoming informed decision-makers in

their care, adverse effects of care can be prevented. Let's look at two healthcare services experienced by my friend: surgery and medication administration. Both present significant risks for safety, but there are actions that you can take to ensure that you don't share Maha's experience.

As you might expect, surgical procedures top the list for healthcare errors and adverse effects, including procedures done on the wrong site, post-operative infections, pneumonia and blood clots in the legs or lungs. All surgical departments have systems in place to reduce the likelihood of these happening, but you can reduce the chances even further by being well informed, by providing complete and correct information and by asking the right questions.

Before your surgery, don't be afraid to ask questions so that you understand your treatment plan and outcomes as well as what you can expect to happen during the surgical process. Discuss with your doctor any chronic conditions that you may have such as diabetes or chronic lung disease, and find out

how these can best be managed during and after your surgery.

Make sure that your doctor is aware of all of the medications that you are taking, including both prescription and over the counter, and ask about how to take your medicines prior to surgery. Some medications and herbal preparations can increase the likelihood of bleeding or other adverse effects post-surgery and should be stopped for a period of time prior to your surgical operation.

Before signing your surgical consent, make sure that all the information on the form is correct: your name, the kind of surgery you will have, that you talked to your doctor about the surgery and have had your questions answered. If you don't understand something on the form, speak up. As a member of your healthcare team, it is your role to make sure that you have all of your questions answered satisfactorily.

On the day of your surgery have someone that you trust go with you and be available to take you home. Anaesthetics can take a few hours to completely leave your body and you may not be safe to drive even after you have recovered from your operation and are ready to go home. A friend or family member who can be with you at the surgical facility can also help to make sure that you receive the care you need to feel comfortable and safe.

After surgery, tell your healthcare providers about your pain. Pain relief is important for the healing process. The doctors and nurses will want to make sure that you are as pain free as possible. Ask questions about any medications that you are receiving: what is it, what is it for, any side effects. Also make sure that your caregivers know about any allergies that you have. Find out about any intravenous fluid that you are receiving and how much time it should take to be complete. Let your nurse know if the fluid seems to be dripping too fast or too slow. Wash your hands carefully after going to the bathroom or handling any kind of soiled material, and don't be afraid to remind the doctors and nurses to wash their hands before providing care for you.

Finally, before leaving the hospital find out what activities you should avoid and when you can resume your normal exercise or work activities. You should also ask if there are medications you should take while you are healing.

Medications are used more than any other intervention in the treatment and prevention of diseases and symptoms such as pain. However, if they are used incorrectly, they can be the source of more harm than good. Appropriate usage, storage and disposal are paramount to ensure medication safety for individuals and for the public. One recent study done in Qatar indicated significant gaps in the safe handling of medications by the general public. A significant proportion of the Qatar residents in the study did not follow the directions for taking the medications that were given to them by the doctor or pharmacist. They also reported that medications were often shared with others in the household and that they were not usually stored in the recommended cool and dry place or with child proof caps.

The study showed that households in Qatar seldom return unwanted medicines to the pharmacy, opting to dispose of them in the garbage or toilet, or to keep them indefinitely. This study clearly illustrates where knowledgeable healthcare consumers can help to decrease the number of accidents related to medication usage.

First of all, have all the information that you need to take your medicines safely: what is the name of the medication; what is it for; how do I take it and for how long; what side effects should I watch for and what do I do if they occur; is it safe to take with the other medications and supplements that I am taking; what food, drink or activities should I avoid while taking this medication. Ask the pharmacist to give you written information about the medication and make sure you ask about anything that you don't understand. Knowing about your medications and carefully following directions for taking them are the most important things you can do to ensure that you take them safely.

Next, make sure that your doctor is aware of all of the medications that you are taking. That includes herbs and folk remedies, vitamins and supplements. Active ingredients in non-prescription medications can interact with prescriptions and cause adverse effects.

Because many medications are available in Qatar without prescription, share this information with the pharmacist as well. Pharmacists are well trained to provide you with the most accurate information about medicines, and to identify when your medication regimen needs to be re-evaluated by a doctor. Also share with your doctor and pharmacist any allergies or reactions that you have had to medications.

How and when you take your medications are as important as getting the right medications. Medicine labels can be difficult to understand, so ask if you don't completely understand. For example, does 4 times a day mean every 6 hours or with meals and at bedtime. Find out about how to best measure your liquid medications. Your pharmacist can suggest devices that will help you to measure an accurate dose. Remember, as well, that your medications are meant for you and the condition that they are supposed to treat. Sharing medications can result in adverse effects, and can deprive you of the amount of medicine that you need for effective treatment of your condition.

Missed doses, over-medicating and accidental poisonings can be prevented by proper storage and disposal of medicines. Medications should be stored locked in a cool dry place in their labelled containers. Keeping them all in one place will help to prevent missed doses. If there are children in your home, child resistant closures can prevent accidental poisoning. Hoarding unused or expired medications is an accident waiting to happen, so dispose of them by returning them to the pharmacy. Medicines inappropriately discarded in the garbage or the plumbing can contaminate water supplies and threaten the environment.

By being an active member of your healthcare team you can help to prevent errors in your care. Research shows that patients who are more involved get better results. The keys are: be knowledgeable about your treatments and medications, ask questions and get the answers that are important to you, be actively involved in decision making about your care, and communicate well with your doctor, pharmacist and other health professionals. The healthcare system cannot do it alone. An informed and proactive healthcare consumer is the missing component of safer medical care.

(Lois Thornton is a Nursing Instructor at University of Calgary, Qatar. Her research interests include gerontology, dementia care and spirituality in nursing.)



## Avoid child burnout

**C**hildren need time to relax. German psychologist Hermann Scheuerer-Englisch notes that timetables at many schools pay little heed to the needs of children. "Some children have no time for themselves any more. They experience their lives as too structured and overloaded," Scheuerer-Englisch says.

School is a full-time occupation for many children, taking up close to 40 hours a week on average for lessons and homework. Scheuerer-Englisch does not see this as a problem, provided there is a balance between learning and relaxing at school.

"The number of hours is not the deciding factor. What is more important is a schooling concept that includes lessons with movement, with creative or musical aspects, alongside the core subjects," he says.

A recent study undertaken in Germany revealed that girls were spending 40 hours

a week on school work and boys 37, while 18 hours were spent with parents. "Chilling" – the term used for simply lazing, daydreaming, listening to music, reading or doing hobbies – was down in third place at 15 hours. The youngsters spent about the same amount of time watching television or in front of the computer.

Parental behaviour was often indicative. "Parents who read, play music or sport have a strong exemplary effect," the psychologist says.

Should the children take on something, they need assistance. "Parents should sit down and plan with their children when and in what order they do their homework. The children should however do the work on their own," Scheuerer-Englisch says.

And basic routine is essential, including mealtimes together. "But children also need time simply to do nothing," he says. — By Doreen Fiedler, DPA

## health briefs

### Don't stop taking antibiotics too early

Patients should not stop taking antibiotics just because they feel better as there is a risk of a relapse. This is the advice of the Regional Chamber of Pharmacists Hessen in Frankfurt, Germany. The reason is that if the body's own defence system cannot kill off the remaining bacteria then they could under certain circumstances recover. Patients should always ask how long they should take medication for. Principally, antibiotics should be taken as infrequently as possible. If they are taken too often, the bacteria get used to the active substance and become immune to them. This resistance, however, goes away with subsequent generations of bacteria. That means the medication can still be effective after a certain period of time.



### Blood type can influence the risk of coronary heart disease

Which blood type you have can influence the risk of coronary heart disease, according to cardiologists from the German National Association of Resident Cardiologists (BNK). A current study from the United States reports that individuals with blood types A, B or AB face higher risks of developing such heart disease than people with blood type O. The risk, according to the study, ranges from 5% (for A) to 23% (for AB) higher. "Strikingly, those with blood type A often have increased LDL cholesterol, which increases the risk of arteriosclerosis," said Norbert Smetak, a cardiologist and federal chairman of the BNK. People with blood type AB tend to have more inflammatory reactions. Smetak said individuals should know their blood type and the potential risks involved and therefore pay attention to their lifestyle. It could be beneficial for people with blood type A to have a low-cholesterol diet. Smetak suggests that all people without blood type O should exercise more and refrain from smoking. — DPA

