Editor’s Letter-Summer 2015

June 2, 2015 By Kate Ferguson

Medical Mistakes Happen

Recently, I visited my gynecologist for a health issue. After I signed the logbook, I sat down to wait. About 15 minutes later, the receptionist called my name and I returned to the receiving window. To my surprise, she asked me for my health insurance information. This struck me as strange; I had just visited my gynecologist two weeks earlier and confirmed that my insurance information was current. Why did I need to do this again, I wondered. But instead of asking the receptionist, I passed her my insurance card and sat down. The reason was soon made clear to me.

After a medical assistant called me into an examination room, she placed a folder with my name on it on the gray countertop in the small, windowless space. Another medical assistant entered the room to take my blood pressure and note my chart in the folder.

As I watched her flip through the papers in my folder, she frowned as she stared hard at the white sheets she’d rustled through. “You’re 71?” she asked. My ears perked up. “Me, 71? No,” I said.

“What’s your name? You are Catherine Ferguson, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m Catherine Ferguson,” I replied. “But I’m not 71.”

In response, she stared down at the folder hard enough to burn holes through the paper. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “You’re not white, either!”

Finally, her brow smoothed out. “You’re the wrong Catherine Ferguson,” she explained. “This isn’t you.”

Well, it couldn’t be me—I certainly wasn’t white and I wasn’t 71.

Then the young woman sighed and shook her head. “She gave me the wrong Catherine Ferguson’s chart,” she muttered. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I’ll be right back.” And with that she turned and left the examination room.

Now I knew why the receptionist asked me for my health information: My doctor has two Catherine Fergusons as patients, and the other Catherine's chart was missing her insurance information.

As I waited for the health care worker to return, I thought about how mistakes like these are probably made every day. Mine was a harmless case of mistaken identity. But, I wondered, suppose I was billed for the other Catherine Ferguson's medical care? What a total disaster that could be!

A worse-case scenario would be suffering harm in a hospital because of a more serious medical mistake, which has happened to an estimated 210,000 to 440,000 patients each year, according to findings from a study of this problem published in a recent issue of the Journal of Patient Safety. What's more, no one knows for sure exactly how many patients suffer "preventable harm" from hospital mistakes, said study authors.

Scary? Sure. But, fortunately, a number of doctors are working on preventing medical mistakes like the one I experienced. It's a simple fix: These docs either snap a patient's photo to include in their file folder, or their offices require patients to present a photo ID when they check in for appointments.

Maybe I'll suggest this to my gynecologist next time.

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