

## Outpatient Pediatric Medical Errors-More Attention Needed

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### Editorial

Research on outpatient pediatric safety and the reduction of preventable adverse events in children has been sorely lacking. The landmark publication *To Err is Human* [1] released in 2000 and triggered a growing interest in patient safety among both the public and the medical establishment. Since then, published studies of medical errors in the pediatric inpatient setting have been far more frequent than publications regarding outpatient errors in this population [2]. The contrast between inpatient and outpatient safety research is even more striking when considering that the number of pediatric hospitalizations pales in comparison with the number of pediatric ambulatory visits each year. In 2015, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality reported 5.6 million pediatric hospitalizations in the United States [3], while the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 125 million ambulatory pediatric visits that year [4].

Why is there such a discrepancy between the overwhelming numbers of pediatric outpatient visits compared to hospitalizations and the meager number of published studies on outpatient pediatric medical errors?

I surmise several possible contributing explanations:

1. Data reporting on inpatient errors is superior. Some of this is driven by requirements of the Joint Commission and various regulatory agencies. There have been very few references of outpatient medical error reporting systems.
2. There may be less awareness of the existence of medical errors by pediatric ambulatory providers than among those working in hospitals.
3. There may be a perception that pediatric inpatient medical errors are more severe than those in the clinic and thus deserve more attention.
4. Academicians who publish may be more active in hospital-based settings than in outpatient practices.
5. Ambulatory clinicians may be too busy in their practices to observe report and publish studies about patient safety and may have little incentive to do so.

So what steps can be recommended to address this discrepancy?

1. Improved reporting systems are needed for outpatient pediatric errors. A few examples of such systems have been reported [5,6].

2. Education is needed that is directed to clinicians about the frequency and types of outpatient pediatric errors, as currently known, and the importance of recognizing them so that future errors may be prevented. The ACGME is making some efforts in error reporting [7], and the ABP is also starting to include some elements of patient safety in its General Pediatric Content Outline [8]. However, neither of these organizations has added a focus on medical errors in the outpatient area.
3. More funding and support of research in office based patient safety is needed.

There is no shortage of research questions ripe for investigation in this area, including:

- What is the incidence of various types of medical errors?
- What risk factors contribute to errors?
- What are effective strategies in improved reporting of errors?
- What reporting systems are effective?
- How can reported errors lead to effective error prevention strategies?

I look forward to the emergence of many young investigators who develop their careers studying and practicing the prevention of medical errors affecting children.

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Received December 03, 2018; Accepted December 10, 2018; Published December 17, 2018

Citation: Neuspiel DR (2018) Outpatient Pediatric Medical Errors-More Attention Needed. *Med Saf Glob Health* 7: e163. doi: [10.4172/2574-0407.1000e163](https://doi.org/10.4172/2574-0407.1000e163)

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