CAVEATS

Policy, legislative, and regulatory issues and trends

To Err Is Human

It is estimated that more people die from medical errors than from breast cancer, motor vehicle accidents, and AIDS. The experts have said that if the error rate occurring in hospitals and health systems occurred in our nation's airlines, no one would take a flight. Frightening statistics—more frightening is that we have been relatively reluctant to discuss our errors in public for fear of the consequences.

quality. President Clinton called the prevention of medical errors a national challenge and has called for immediate action. He has proposed mandatory medical-error reporting and has fully endorsed the IOM report. The White House will encourage post-error review by supporting legislation to protect provider and patient confidentiality.

Much of the IOM report relates to errors that occur in hospitals. It would

organizations in taking a proactive position on addressing this critical issue. Pharmacy's voice is being heard in Congress and pharmacists are being recognized for our important role in patient care. To those organizations and PBMs that are already addressing these issues, you are to be commended. Go one step further; share your successes with others. Everyone benefits when we work together as an industry. To those of you just beginning this process, know that there are others out there to assist you. I have heard the findings in the IOM report called an embarrassment for health care. There are two ways one can look at this issue: yes, this is an embarrassment, a "glass half empty" if you will. Or one can see this as the reciprocal, the "glass half full"—something that we as health care providers need to react to—and look upon this report as an opportunity to highlight our contributions and work together to improve patient care. Take a good look at your organization and consider the glass. Which are you, half empty or half full? ■

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Television news programs routinely produce sensationalized segments on individuals harmed by medical error, and finger pointing and blame are the norm. This type of journalism does not facilitate public discussion of how best to solve the problem.

The Institute of Medicine's (IOM's) report on medical errors, *To Err Is Human: Building a Safer Health System*, has brought national attention to this important health care issue. It attempts to refocus the medical error discussion on systemic lapses rather than individual mistakes. This publication has outlined a framework for how our country can address this issue on the federal and state level. To date, there have been seven hearings in the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate discussing the issue of medical errors. The Clinton administration has also jumped on the bandwagon. On February 22, 2000, the White House released a statement announcing actions to improve patient safety and ensure health care

be naïve to think that once a patient leaves a hospital and/or health system that an error cannot occur. Additional reports from the IOM will discuss medical errors in ambulatory/community settings and ways to promote and develop safer systems for our patients.

One of the most positive things to come out of this report and the recent articles in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* is that the role of pharmacists in reducing and preventing medication errors has been highlighted. There has never been a better time to demonstrate the value of pharmacists and our role as members of the health care team. This report is breaking down some of the traditional turf battles we have seen between different disciplines. Multi-disciplinary groups are meeting to address this issue on both the state and federal level. How novel! All facets of health care and the people that regulate it coming together to try to solve such an important problem.

I applaud the efforts of the pharmacy

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