

After father's tragedy, one doctor successfully dedicates his career to reducing medical mistakes

When Peter Pronovost was in college, his father, age 45, who had been in excellent health, was diagnosed with lymphoma, a form of cancer.

He remembers how the impact of that news hit him; he recalls watching his father, whose bones were being eaten away by chemotherapy, in terrible pain. He remembers how it gave him a focus that led him to medical school and a search for answers.

In his first year of medical school, he brought his father to Johns Hopkins and found that he had been misdiagnosed. His father had leukemia. The physician told them if it had been diagnosed earlier, he could have had a bone marrow transplant. But now, there was nothing that could be done. His father was going to die.

This experience, and others he witnessed while in medical school, led him to attempt to change the entire way that medicine was being practiced in hospitals—to help prevent medical mistakes. A gargantuan goal most thought impossible, but one which he has achieved.

Pronovost, author of the book "Safe Patients, Smart Hospitals: How One Doctor's Checklist Can Help Us Change Health Care from the Inside Out" has created a process and checklist that has reduced infections at Johns Hopkins to almost zero.

In an article in *The New Yorker*, author Atul Gawande said, "Pronovost's work has already saved more lives than that of any laboratory scientist in the world." He was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2008.

His work is being studied and utilized by hospitals all over the world. A three-year study in Michigan (reported recently in the *New England Journal of Medicine*) has resulted in hundreds of lives saved and a drastic reduction in the rate of infections in hospitals there.

The Virginia Commonwealth



Dr. Peter Pronovost, Director, Quality and Safety Research Group and Medical Director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Innovation in Quality Patient Care

University Health System reports that over a three-year period, utilizing the procedures and processes Pronovost endorses, it has cut its hospital-incurred infection rate by 85 percent.

How can you and your loved ones stay safe in the hospital? A big part of that is being a pest.

You must overcome your reluctance to question doctors and nurses. Many people are afraid to question what is being done to them but your life can depend on it. The reduction in rates of infection and medical error where Pronovost's practices have been adopted prove that his methods are effective.

Question what is going on with your care. If possible, have someone (friend, relative, hired advocate) with you in the hospital who can help you. Being cooperative does not mean you cannot question what is being done to you or yours.

Pronovost's Web site is safercare.net/OTCSBSI/Home.html. **FP**

Ways to reduce the risk of infection

To reduce your risk of infection while in the hospital:

- Ask that hospital staff clean their hands before treating you, and ask visitors to clean their hands too. This is the single most important way to protect yourself in the hospital. If you're worried about being too aggressive, just remember your life could be at stake.
- If you need a "central line" catheter, ask your doctor about the benefits of one that is antibiotic-impregnated or silver-chlorhexidine coated to reduce infections. Avoid a urinary tract catheter if possible. If you must have an IV, make sure that it's inserted and removed under clean conditions and changed every three to four days. Your skin should be cleaned at the site of insertion, and the person treating you should be wearing clean gloves. Alert hospital staff immediately if any redness appears.
- If you need surgery, choose a surgeon with a low infection rate. Surgeons know their rate of infection

for various procedures. Don't be afraid to ask for it.

- Beginning three to five days before surgery, shower or bathe daily with chlorhexidine soap. Various brands can be bought without a prescription. It will help remove any dangerous bacteria you may be carrying on your own skin.
- On the day of your operation, remind your doctor that you may need an antibiotic 1 hour before the first incision. For many types of surgery, a pre-surgical antibiotic is the standard of care, but it is often overlooked by busy hospital staff.
- Avoid touching your hands to your mouth, and do not set food or utensils on furniture or bed sheets. Germs such as "C. Diff" can live for many days on surfaces and can cause infections if they get into your mouth.

These suggestions and more can be found at hospitalinfection.org/objective.shtml.