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Group: Medical Errors Still Killing 98,000 Each Year

Despite a decade of promises, little has been done to fix the problem of preventable medical errors that kill nearly 98,000 people in the United States each year, a consumer group said on Tuesday.

Consumers Union, the nonprofit publisher of Consumer Reports magazine, said lawmakers largely have failed to enact patient safety reforms recommended by a 1999 report by the Institute of Medicine or IOM that found that medical errors cost the United States \$17 billion to \$29 billion a year.

"There is little evidence to suggest that the number of people dying from medical harm has dropped since the IOM first warned about these deadly mistakes a decade ago," Lisa McGiffert of the Consumers Union said in a statement.

"That means a million lives and billions of dollars have been lost over the past 10 years because our health care system failed to adopt key reforms recommended by the IOM to protect patients."

In 1999, the IOM projected that 98,000 people die each year needlessly because of preventable medical errors. Consumers Union said little has changed in the past 10 years, and the group now projects that preventable medical errors now account for more than for more than 100,000 deaths each year - or as many as 1 million lives over the past decade.

The group maintains that reducing medical harm - including hospital-acquired infections and medication errors - would not only improve patient care but also provide significant cost savings to help make expanded access to health coverage possible.

Preventing errors and improving efficiency is also a central plank of President Barack Obama's plan for reforming the U.S. health care system, the most expensive in the world. The consumer group urged U.S. lawmakers to make patient safety a key focus of any health reform policy.

"As the debate over health care heats up in Washington, Congress should make sure that improving patient safety is a central part of any reform legislation it adopts," McGiffert said.

The 1999 report by the institute, one of the National Academies of Sciences that advise U.S. policymakers, found preventable medication errors cost the nation \$3.5 billion each year. Such errors include giving or prescribing the wrong drug, giving patients the wrong dose or giving the drug in the wrong way.

The economic stimulus bill signed by Congress in February included about \$19 billion to promote the use of healthcare information technology, including electronic prescribing, which can help prevent medication errors from sloppy hand writing and harmful drug interactions.

The Pharmaceutical Care Management Association in March projected that as many as 75 percent of U.S. doctors will move to electronic prescribing within 5 years, spurred by new rules from Medicare, the federal insurance program for the elderly and disabled, that give doctors an incentive to switch.

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