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**Commentary on The PBS “Remaking American Medicine” Series**

PBS’ series on “Remaking American Medicine” does a commendable job showing viewers some of the dramatic changes transforming the face of health care in this country as we make health care treatment both safer and more effective.

The first program’s profile of Sorrel King and her work with Johns Hopkins to turn a tragedy into a movement for patient safety is a wonderful example of how hospitals across Maryland are reexamining their procedures to prevent avoidable medical errors and reduce hospital-acquired infections.

This commitment led to the founding of the Maryland Patient Safety Center, which brings health care providers together to understand causes of unsafe practices and to put practical, evidence-based improvements in place. In just two years, the Center—a joint venture between the Maryland Hospital Association and the Delmarva Foundation—has made substantial progress.

Providers’ enthusiasm for the work of the Center and their commitment to patient safety improvements continues to grow. In 2005, our first statewide conference drew 668 participants from around the state. This year’s conference doubled in size to 1,200 health care professionals.

Education and training by the Patient Safety Center has raised awareness among 3,000 health care professionals about safety strategies and process improvements that can result in a culture of safety.

Further, more than 70 teams from health care facilities across the state have worked on safety collaboratives—intense year-long commitments by clinical teams to improving a particular area of care. The Center’s first collaborative target: intensive care units (ICUs)—high-risk hospital settings with high potential for harm. Fifty-two ICUs from 37 hospitals set out to eliminate preventable health care-associated infections and coordinate health care delivery so patients leave the ICU healthier and faster.
Ventilator-associated pneumonias and bloodstream infections have been reduced in participating ICUs. Five hospitals saw their ventilator-assisted pneumonia cases drop to zero and 10 hospitals eliminated catheter-related bloodstream infections.

We are seeing encouraging signs from our second patient-safety collaboration focused on the emergency department. Our work is aimed at better communication and better coordination of emergency department teams; providing more rapid treatment for seriously ill patients with pneumonia, heart attacks and stroke, and decreasing the number of patients who get emergency department–acquired bloodstream infections.

A third collaborative, funded by The Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, will examine ways to improve patient safety in labor and delivery units in Maryland hospitals. Priorities include reducing the risk of harming any infant and lowering hospital infant mortality rates related to the birth process.

The safe use of medications is another priority of the Maryland Patient Safety Center through its MEDSAFE project. We provide Maryland hospitals with a systematic assessment of their processes for dispensing medications, share best practices in medication safety and help them identify shortcomings and take corrective action.

With encouragement from the Center, hospitals throughout Maryland have turned increasingly to the use of hospitalists (full-time hospital based physicians), and other hospital processes that vastly improve communication among the many health care providers responsible for a patient’s well-being. More than half of Maryland hospitals now have rapid response teams in place to ensure early intervention when a patient is in distress.

In January, the Center convened a conference on another major hospital problem—the rapid growth of a type of bacteria that resists certain antibiotics. It is known as methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureaus, or MRSA for short, and occurs most frequently among patients with weakened immune systems.
MRSA infections are increasing at a relentless rate and can lead to preventable deaths, untold suffering, and significant cost increases. With the financial support of CareFirst BlueCross/BlueShield and a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Plexus Institute grant the Center is embarking on a journey to eliminate MRSA in Maryland hospitals through a multi-faceted approach to stimulate the discovery and creation of new strategies. It started in January with a leadership conference to share best practices.

The Maryland Patient Safety Center is an innovative model, which has won the prestigious John M. Eisenberg award for patient safety initiatives. It is unique for its comprehensive approach, and is being studied by several states planning similar strategies. These initiatives have positioned the Maryland Patient Safety Center as a national leader in developing innovative and more effective ways to turn hospitals into “error-free and infection-free zones” for our patients and to make Maryland health care the safest in the U.S.

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