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PIAA Response to BMJ Article: ‘Medical error—the third leading cause of death in the U.S.’

Rockville, MD (May 6, 2016) – On May 3, 2016, the BMJ published an article, “Medical error—the third leading cause of death in the U.S.” PIAA, the nation’s leading association representing the medical and healthcare professional liability (MPL/HPL) insurance community, has issued the following statement in response to this article:

“While it may sound alarming that medical error ranks so high among causes of death, this article should be put into its proper context. We believe that the authors use an overly broad characterization of ‘medical errors,’ which will inevitably perpetuate public confusion about the precise definitions of preventable harm and medical negligence. If the public draws its conclusions from such misleading information, that could, ultimately, result in significant damage if it discourages patients from seeking the vital medical care they need from the nation’s hospitals, clinics and facilities, and healthcare professionals.

To reach its conclusions, the article assumes the broadest possible definitions of medical error, definitions that could even be used in the instance of the most successful of medical encounters. The article also neglects to point out that ‘errors’ are not per se indicative of negligence. In addition, it fails to define the critical term ‘preventable.’ In the delivery of healthcare, as in any field, almost any harm can be deemed preventable when it is viewed in hindsight.

The article builds on statistics that were included in the 1999 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report To Err Is Human that many now recognize as deeply flawed. The statistics on patient deaths that were cited in To Err Is Human lack credibility, because they were extracted from very limited samples. For example, the determination that there were 98,000 deaths from medical error, nationally, was extrapolated from an analysis of only 180 deaths that had occurred among 30,000 patients.

The U.S. healthcare system comprises more than 300 million patients, 800,000 physicians, 5,500 hospitals, and thousands of outpatient facilities. It is dynamic, and now confronts the aging population of baby boomers—many of whom have complex and chronic medical conditions and must learn to cope with an increasingly fragmented system of care. Despite these challenges, however, PIAA member companies have achieved major advances in patient safety and in the reduction of adverse outcomes.

The National Patient Safety Foundation has stated, “It may never be possible to eliminate harm altogether—there will always be new technologies and treatments with new risks, and protecting patients from one harm may increase their risk of another, which may lead to trade-offs.” As long as there is a prevailing attitude that ‘someone is at fault,’ impediments to progress will be inevitable. The dedicated professionals who work in our healthcare system strive for continuous improvement. We believe that the primary focus when an adverse
outcome occurs, or when a near-error takes place, should be on how to change the system to make this outcome less likely to happen again.

PIAA recognizes that the problem of adverse outcomes in medical care requires ongoing attention—but believes that misleading and distorted messaging is not helpful to that effort. We will continue to work in partnership with our members and other stakeholders to find measures that will further enhance the safe and high-quality delivery of medical care.”

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*PIAA is the nation’s leading association representing medical professional liability insurance companies, risk retention groups, captives, trusts, and other entities with a commitment to the quality delivery of healthcare. PIAA members insure more than 2 million healthcare professionals around the world—doctors, dentists, nurses and nurse practitioners, and other healthcare providers—including more than two-thirds of America’s private practicing physicians. PIAA members also insure more than 2,000 hospitals and 8,000 medical facilities.*