



## Association of open communication and the emotional and behavioural impact of medical error on patients and families: state-wide crosssectional survey

Read the article: <https://qualitysafety.bmj.com/content/early/2020/01/20/bmjqs-2019-010367.full>

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### In Brief

Though negative emotional impacts from medical errors can persist for years, open communication about those errors by health care providers is associated with significantly reduced feelings of sadness and depression on the part of patients and families. People are also less likely to avoid future health care encounters after an error when it is acknowledged by the health care team, according to a survey of Massachusetts residents published in BMJ Quality & Safety.

The survey by the Betsy Lehman Center for Patient Safety found that more than 20 percent of people who experienced a medical error three to six years ago still felt sad, anxious, angry, betrayed or abandoned. But those who were given information about the error and were offered a chance to talk and ask questions about the event openly with the care team or facility involved, were significantly less likely to report long-term emotional harm.

### News Release

#### Open communication about medical errors is linked to decreased emotional harm to patients and families

BOSTON, MA — Though negative emotional impacts from medical errors can persist for years, open communication about those errors by health care providers is associated with significantly reduced feelings of sadness and depression on the part of patients and families. People are also less likely to avoid future health care encounters after an error when it is acknowledged by the health care team, according to a survey of Massachusetts residents published today in BMJ Quality & Safety.

A 2018 survey by the Betsy Lehman Center for Patient Safety found that more than 20 percent of people who experienced a medical error 3 to 6 years ago still felt sad, anxious, angry, betrayed or abandoned, and over a third reported that they were avoiding medical care.

However, open communication about a medical error experience mitigated these emotional harms. People who were given information about the error and were offered a chance to talk and ask questions about the event openly with the care team or facility involved, were significantly less likely to report long-term emotional harm.

“Until now, we have lacked meaningful data about the long-term impact of communication on patients’ well-being or subsequent health-seeking behaviors,” says Julia Prentice, a co-author of the study and research director at the Betsy Lehman Center. “This research fills an important gap in knowledge about the effects of open communication after medical errors or adverse events.”

Many of us in health care have witnessed the positive impact of open communication first-hand, but now we have data that underscores what providers can do to alleviate the harm done to patients and their families,” says another of the study’s co-authors, Sigall Bell, director of patient safety and discovery at OpenNotes and associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School.

Of greatest concern is the avoidance of medical care by patients or their family members after an error or adverse event. The survey found that 77 to 80 percent of respondents who received no communication about an adverse event avoided doctors and health care facilities involved in the error, but this dropped to 30 percent or less for those whose providers talked openly about what went wrong.

“Although there has been considerable progress on improving the safety of health care in recent years, medical errors persist.” says Barbara Fain, executive director at the Betsy Lehman Center. “If there is one thing we can do today that would make a considerable difference for patients and families, it is to be more transparent and more supportive as they recover from the medical and emotional injuries they sustain.”

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**About the Betsy Lehman Center:** *The Betsy Lehman Center is a Massachusetts state agency that uses communications and research to catalyze the efforts of providers, policymakers, and the public working toward safer health care across the state. The Center is named for the Boston Globe health reporter and young mother who died in 1994 from an overdose of chemotherapy during treatment for breast cancer.*

## Social Media Posts

### Twitter

New research published in @BMJ\_Qual\_Saf shows that open communication alleviates emotional harm for patients and families who have experienced a medical error <https://bit.ly/2TGVcmJ> #patientsafety @BetsyLehmanCtr

Negative emotional impacts from medical errors can persist for years, but a new study in @BMJ\_Qual\_Saf shows open communication may significantly reduce feelings of sadness and depression in patients and families. <https://bit.ly/2TGVcmJ> #patientsafety @BetsyLehmanCtr

New research from @BetsyLehmanCtr found that after an error, patients and families were less likely to avoid the doctors and facilities involved if they were transparent about what happened. <https://bit.ly/2TGVcmJ> @BMJ\_Qual\_Saf #patientsafety

“Until now, we have lacked meaningful data about the long-term impact of communication on patients’ well-being or subsequent health-seeking behaviors.” Julia Prentice @BetsyLehmanCtr on the new study in @BMJ\_Qual\_Saf <https://bit.ly/2TGVcmJ> #patientsafety

“Many of us in health care have witnessed the positive impact of open communication first-hand, but now we have data.” - Sigall Bell @myopennotes @harvardmed <https://bit.ly/2TGVcmJ> via @BMJ\_Qual\_Saf #patientsafety

“If there is one thing we can do today that would make a considerable difference for patients & families, it is to be more transparent and more supportive as they recover from medical errors” - Barbara Fain, @BetsyLehmanCtr <https://bit.ly/2TGVcmJ> #patientsafety

### Facebook & LinkedIn

We are proud to have worked with the Betsy Lehman Center on this research about the impact of open communication for patients and families who have experienced an adverse event. Their survey shows that people who were given information and were offered a chance to talk and ask questions about the event openly with the care team or facility involved, were significantly less likely to report long-term emotional harm. Learn more: <https://bit.ly/2TGVcmJ>

Though negative emotional impacts from adverse events can persist for years, open communication about those errors by health care providers is linked to significantly reduced feelings of sadness and depression on the part of patients and families. Learn about the new study in BMJ Quality & Safety: <https://bit.ly/2TGVcmJ>

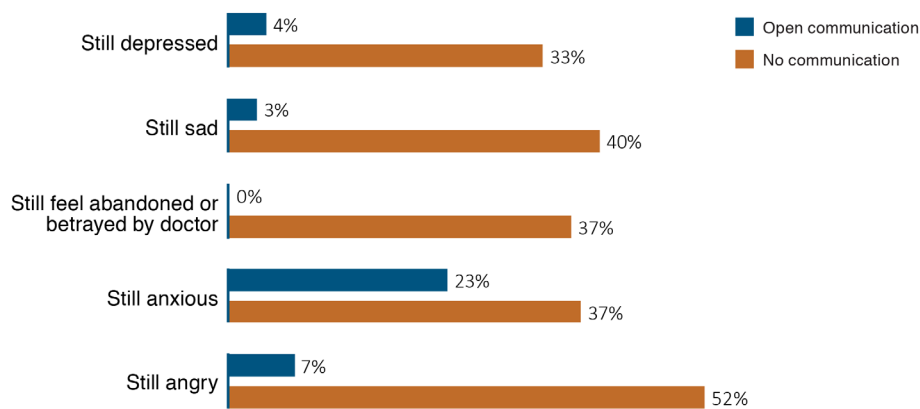
New research from the Betsy Lehman Center for Patient Safety found that more than 20 percent of people who experienced

a medical error three to six years ago still felt sad, anxious, angry, betrayed or abandoned. But those who were given information and offered a chance to talk and ask questions about the event openly with the care team or facility involved, were significantly less likely to report long-term emotional harm. Read more in BMJ Quality & Safety: <https://bit.ly/2TGVcmJ>

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### WHEN PROVIDERS COMMUNICATE OPENLY, EMOTIONAL HARM IS ALLEVIATED



### OPEN COMMUNICATION ALLEVIATES HEALTH CARE AVOIDANCE

