5 Things We Can Do to Make Diagnosis Safer

Andrew P.J. Olson, MD, FAAP, FACP
Assistant Professor of Medicine and Pediatrics
University of Minnesota Medical School
olso5714@umn.edu
@andrewolsonMD
The Diagnostic Process

- Patient Experiences a Health Problem
- Patient Engages with Healthcare System
- Information Gathering: Clinical History and Interview, Physical Exam, Referral and Consultation, Diagnostic Testing
- Information Integration & Interpretation: Has sufficient information been collected?
- Working Diagnosis
- Communication of the Diagnosis: The explanation of the health problem that is communicated to the patient
- Treatment: The planned path of care based on the diagnosis
- Outcomes: Patient and System Outcomes
  Learning from diagnostic errors, near misses, and accurate, timely diagnoses

TIME
A Grammar Lesson

Diagnosis as outcome (noun):

An explanation of a patient’s health problem.

Diagnosis as process (verb):

The process used to arrive at an explanation for a patient’s health problem.
What Is Diagnostic Error?

• The failure to establish an accurate and timely explanation of a patient’s health problem(s) or communicate that to the patient.

• A diagnosis that is:
  – Wrong
  – Missed
  – Delayed

• A missed opportunity to make a diagnosis

• Overdiagnosis – when a diagnosis is made that is unlikely to ever have the potential to influence a patient’s health
Defining Preventable Diagnostic Harm

- **A** (MISSED OPPORTUNITIES)
  - Missed opportunities in diagnosis due to system and/or cognitive factors

- **B** (HARM)
  - Preventable diagnostic harm
  - (from delayed or wrong treatment/test)

- **C** (NO MISSED OPPORTUNITIES)
  - Delayed/wrong diagnosis associated with patient harm but no clear evidence of missed opportunities

- **D** (NO MISSED OPPORTUNITIES)
  - Delayed/wrong diagnosis but no clear evidence of missed opportunities

Courtesy of Hardeep Singh, MD
Adapted from Singh, Jt Comm J Qual Patient Saf 2014
Improving the diagnostic process is not only possible, but also represents a moral, professional, and public health imperative.
How can we make diagnosis better?

1) Be relentless about learning from cases

2) Make sure follow-up is seamless

3) Share your uncertainty

4) Expand the diagnostic team
Be relentless about learning from cases
Decision Making Process

Physician

Re-calibrate

Outcome

Unknown

Unfavorable Unexpected

Favorable Expected

Maintain Calibration

Harnessing Existing Opportunities to Improve Feedback

Lesson One: Something is better than nothing

- Discharge followup phone calls
  - Add a question about diagnosis and diagnostic change

- Transitions of care and handovers
  - Feedback to previous providers
  - Automatic discharge summary routing

- Readmissions and revisits
  - Previous provider notification
  - Review for diagnostic change
Diagnostic Change based on Feedback Forms

- No Change: 56%
- Diagnostic Refinement: 21%
- Disease Evolution: 11%
- Major Diagnostic Change: 12%

N=478
Be sure follow-up is seamless
NO NEWS IS GOOD NEWS
NO NEWS IS GOOD NEWS NO
Ensure follow-up is seamless

• Is there a plan for follow-up in every note?
• Does the patient know that plan?
• Does a safety net exist?
Share your uncertainty
We know what we know, we know there are things we do not know, and we know there are things we don’t know we don’t know.

Donald Rumsfeld
The subjective and often appropriate perception that a clear and accurate explanation of a patient’s health problem is not able to be determined at this time.
There is so much knowledge, so much capacity, so much data. And yet with all of these assets, the chances for confusion, miscommunication, and conflicting analysis remain, and may even be enhanced. In medicine, a field like no other in its capacity to intervene between life and death, maybe it’s time to reexamine the value of doubt in the diagnostic equation.
Discussion of Uncertainty

Plan Making

Uncertainty Not Resolvable (Aleatoric Uncertainty)

Relationship Building

Working diagnosis not made (Explicit Uncertainty)

Uncertainty Resolvable (Epistemic Uncertainty)

Working diagnosis made (Certain enough)

Diagnostic and Treatment Plan

Patient + Symptom

Provider
Expand the Diagnostic Team
Expanding the Diagnostic Team

• What doesn’t fit in this explanation for you?
• Given your experience with this, what do you think about our current approach?
• What have you read about your condition?
Thank you!

olso5714@umn.edu
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