

Pfizer says it could be leader in cancer with many new drugs

Diagnosis wrong too often, urgent improvement needed

WASHINGTON, Sept 23, (AP): Most Americans will experience at least one wrong or delayed diagnosis at some point in their lives, a blind spot in modern medicine that can have devastating consequences, says a new US report that calls for urgent changes across health care.

Getting the right diagnosis, at the right time, is crucial, but Tuesday's Institute of Medicine report found diagnostic errors get too little attention.

The biggest needed change: "Patients are central to a solution," said Dr John Ball of the American College of Physicians, who chaired the IOM committee.

That means better teamwork between health providers — doctors, nurses, lab workers — and making the patient be part of the team, too. Providers must take patients' complaints more seriously, get them quick copies of test results and other records, and encourage them to ask, "Could it be something else?"

Another culture shift: When the patient's third doctor finally gets the right diagnosis, it should become the norm, not an embarrassment, for that physician to call the others and say, "It turned out this patient had X and not Y," added committee member Dr Christine Cassel, president of the National Quality Forum. "That's the only way we can really learn."

Emergency

Possibly the most well-known diagnostic error in recent memory occurred last year when a Liberian man sick with Ebola initially was misdiagnosed in a Dallas emergency room as having sinusitis. Thomas Eric Duncan returned two days later, sicker, and eventually died.

Diagnosis problems seldom make such dramatic headlines. Consider the woman who told the IOM of going to the emergency room with heart attack symptoms only to be misdiagnosed with acid reflux and was fussed at for questioning

Simple advice leads to substantial changes

Txt msgs may lead to broad heart-tied benefits

CHICAGO, Sept 23, (Agencies): Txt msgs may b gud 4U.

That's the message in a study that suggests just four monthly text messages might spur health improvements for heart patients.

The simple, heart-related advice led to substantial changes in blood pressure, cholesterol and physical activity levels, according to the results published in Tuesday's Journal of the American Medical Association.

About 700 Australian adults took part. The strategy cost just \$10 a person, and if lasting benefits can be shown in a broader group of patients, it could be a cheap and simple way to help tackle heart disease, the leading cause of death worldwide.

Smaller studies have linked health-oriented text messages with improvement in a single measure, but this is the largest to find multiple benefits, the researchers said, led by Dr Clara Chow of the University of Sydney's George Institute for Global Health.

The researchers randomly assigned heart patients to receive usual care alone, or usual care plus automated healthy text messages for six months. Almost one-third of the text message group reached

target levels for four or more heart disease risk factors, versus only 10 percent of the usual care group. These included blood pressure below 140 over 90, exercising at least five times weekly for 30 mins, and not smoking.

A sampling of the messages:

■ Try avoiding adding salt to your foods by using other spices or herbs.

■ Walking is cheap. It can be done almost anywhere. All you need is comfortable shoes & clothing.

■ Try identifying the triggers that make you want a cigarette & plan to avoid them.

■ Studies show that stress, worry & loneliness can increase the risk of heart disease. Please talk to a health professional if you need help.

The study didn't last long enough to see if improvement in heart disease risk factors led to fewer heart attacks. A journal editorial notes other weaknesses included relying on patients self-reporting physical activity levels, and no attempt to measure whether adding more text messages would lead to bigger improvements.

The benefits could potentially "reduce risk of recurrent heart attacks by at least a quarter if they were maintained long-term," said Chow. "We think it is really

likely as other claims to have resulted in a patient's death.

Even among the IOM committee's medical specialists, "many of us had experienced what we would define as a diagnostic error," Ball said.

The prestigious Institute of Medicine kicked off a revolution in health quality improvement back in 1999 when it estimated between 44,000 and 98,000 people a year die of preventable medical mistakes in hospitals. In the years since, the focus was more on hospital infections and medication errors rather than diagnostic errors.

Those errors aren't part of standard medical reporting, and even the autop-

important to see if they can be repeated elsewhere in Australia and internationally, and maintained long-term."

Chow said she's involved in a broader study at about 20 centers in Australia in urban, rural and indigenous settings, and will be following patients to see if the text message program results in lasting benefits.

Also:

NEW YORK: Coca-Cola Co said it has spent almost \$120 million on funding scientific research, a disclosure that comes at a time when the company is facing criticism for trying to downplay the role of sugary drinks in the spread of obesity.

The company also launched a website on Tuesday to update details about its research efforts and the experts it has worked with in the past five years.

The move follows a New York Times report in August that the cola maker was funding scientists who claim Americans are overly fixated on how much they eat and drink and not paying enough attention to exercise.

US sales of carbonated soft drinks have been declining for nearly a decade due to increasing public backlash against full-calorie as well as diet sodas.

gies that once helped uncover them have become rare. Tuesday's report urged health organizations to better identify diagnostic errors so providers can learn to prevent them — and called on the government to step up research, including funding an autopsy study to help quantify the problem.

One survivor of a diagnostic error says even when patients can tell something's wrong, it's hard to know what to do next.

Peggy Zuckerman was told a dangerous case of anemia was due to a stomach ulcer, but treatment didn't help and the hospital specialist discounted other symptoms. After eight months, testing showed she had advanced kidney cancer.



In this Oct 6, 2014, file photo, a hazardous material cleaner removes a wrapped item from the Dallas apartment where Thomas Eric Duncan, the Ebola patient who traveled from Liberia to Dallas, stayed. (AP)

The woman was lucky: Treatment worked. Only later did she see health records showing a pathology report had all but ruled out an ulcer during her first visit.

"I had never been sick before. I didn't know how you handle things," recalled Zuckerman. Twelve years later, she's now a patient advocate who tells people to get all their records immediately so they'll know what to ask.

"This is not about blame. It's about understanding how errors arise and what we can do to prevent them," said Dr Mark Graber of the Society to Improve Diagnosis in Medicine, which prompted the IOM study.

Drug giant Pfizer is starting 20 clinical trials this year and more soon after on treatments to conquer cancer as it also seeks to gain leadership in one of the hottest, and most lucrative, areas of medicine.

A decade ago, the world's second-biggest drugmaker by revenue wasn't even a player in cancer medicine. Instead, it was known for erectile dysfunction treatment Viagra and blockbuster cholesterol fighter Lipitor.

New York-based Pfizer Inc. then chose to make cancer one of its core research areas, pitting it against cancer powerhouses including Novartis AG, Roche Holding AG, Bristol-Myers Squibb Co and Merck & Co.

Approved

Today, Pfizer has eight approved cancer medicines, four of them launched in the last four years. It's running late-stage patient tests on five of those drugs for additional uses, has three other drugs in late-stage testing — usually the last round before seeking regulators' approval — and has 14 other drug programs in early stages.

Those programs together provide for a two-pronged attack on cancer, including tumor-killing drugs and treatments in the promising new class called immunoncology that stimulate the immune system to mount a stronger defense against cancer.

Scientists "have never been closer to finding a cancer cure," Mikael Dolsten, Pfizer's head of worldwide research and development, told journalists Tuesday during an update on the company's cancer research strategy.

"Compared to other companies, we are uniquely positioned to be a leader" in cancer, Dolsten added.

He and other Pfizer executives said that's because killing tumors and preventing cancer recurrence requires regimens of multiple drugs given together or sequentially, and the company has many drugs that work by different mechanisms to try together.

"They clearly have the scale and R&D experience over time to be a major player in the immuno-oncology market," said Edward Jones analyst Ashtyn Evans. "We've seen them do a lot in a short time."

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