



**MEDICAL ERRORS, PERFECTIONISM AND
POOR TEAM COMMUNICATION:
WHAT'S THE CONNECTION?**

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SEMINAR OBJECTIVE – TO REDUCE MEDICAL ERRORS IN MEDICINE BY:

1. Examining perfectionism in physicians and its ultimate impact of causing them to not admit to or to be closed off to feedback from others about their mistakes, which can harm patients
2. Offering methods to convert perfectionism into healthy self-confidence and professional competence
3. Fostering compassionate teamwork allowing all professionals to discuss errors with each other without fear

DESCRIPTION

Physicians, often due to perfectionism, sometimes feel immune from making errors, and have difficulty when others point them out. Patients can be harmed in the process: an attending physician who angrily refuses to address when a resident points out he has mixed up medication orders on two patients, claiming the resident should not question his authority; or a surgeon who won't acknowledge a nurse who tries to point out he's about to remove the wrong organ. And no doctor is immune from errors. Even highly skilled experts and leaders make mistakes and get sued.

What does perfectionism have to do with this? What underlies perfectionism is low self-esteem, and an often unconscious fear of being wrong or "found out," and of making mistakes. Beneath a well-put-together outer persona is an individual who feels badly about themselves and is highly self-critical. This person will not willingly admit errors.

Miller, et al, discuss perfectionism as a trait widely shared among physicians. Critically, it often underlies why more than twice as many doctors as the general population commits suicide. Also, while it may lead to conscientiousness during medical school and to a thorough clinical approach, it may also breed an unforgiving attitude when mistakes inevitably occur. Fear of medico-legal consequences may exacerbate this distress about clinical errors.¹ Christensen et al, in interviews with physicians, found they experienced great distress over making mistakes. Even though they recognized the ubiquity of mistakes in clinical practice, they nonetheless believed they could not disclose mistakes to colleagues and experienced a lack of support from colleagues in addressing these concerns. Perfectionism and the competitiveness engendered in medical training were key reasons for experiencing distress about clinical errors.²

For many perfectionistic individuals entering medicine, their continuous striving to be the perfect doctor compounded by the rigors of medical training and the sometimes unforgiving pressure cast upon residents by perfectionistic clinical trainers, transforms their perfectionism into arrogance. "Me? Make a mistake? I'M PERFECT! I'm a doctor! And I don't MAKE mistakes!" Such doctors are not only hesitant to admit mistakes, but become closed to colleagues who point them out. The results can be disastrous for patients.

The medical team is also negatively impacted. Fear of speaking up to an angry, closed off physician leads to medical errors in itself. Nurses and other "subordinates" may see an error is about to be made but remain silent. As a result communication, the self-esteem and cooperation of team members, and the team itself, erodes.

TOPICS COVERED:

To address this problem, this seminar goes straight to the core of the matter by directly addressing mistakes and perfectionism – in physicians and other team members – head-on, as well as team function and communication. Through discussion, group exercises and meditative techniques that promote personal change, the topics are:

- a. That "Mistakes" are positive – learning results from them, and major accomplishments result after many mistakes.
- b. Definition of perfectionism, why it develops, its impact on medical care, on individuals and on those close to them.
- c. The strong correlation between physician suicide and perfectionism.
- d. How to begin to convert perfectionism into healthy self-respect, self-confidence and competence.
- e. The difference between "Excellence" and "Perfection" in quality of work, and which is attainable vs. an illusion.
- f. True self-respect means accepting one's vulnerabilities and talents and allows one to admit errors.
- g. Self-respect promotes respect of others, in this case the medical team, regardless of their status.
- h. A respectful, communicative, cohesive medical team optimizes patient care and reduces medical errors.
- i. Communication methods for discussing errors and giving constructive feedback when errors are made.

1. Miller MN, MCGOWEN KR: The Painful Truth: Physicians Are Not Invincible. South Med J 93(10) 2000; 966-972

2. Christensen JF, Levinson W, Dunn PM: Heart of darkness: the impact of perceived mistakes on physicians. J Gen Intern Med 1992; 7:424-431