Aging Doctors Come Under Greater Scrutiny

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A distinguished vascular specialist in his 80s performs surgery, then goes on vacation, forgetting he has patients in the hospital; one subsequently dies because no doctor was overseeing his care. An internist who suffered a stroke gets lost going from one exam room to another in his own office. A beloved general surgeon with Alzheimer's disease continues to assist in operations because hospital officials don't have the heart to tell him to retire.

Dr. Ephraim Engleman, 101, still practices medicine, and has no plans to retire.

These real-life examples, provided by an expert who evaluates impaired physicians, exemplify an emotionally charged issue that is attracting the attention of patient safety experts and hospital administrators: how to ensure that older doctors are competent to treat patients.

About 42 percent of the nation's 1 million physicians are older than 55 and 21 percent are older than 65, according to the American Medical Association, up from 35 percent and 18 percent, respectively, in 2006. Their ranks are expected to increase as many work past the traditional retirement age of 65, for reasons both personal and financial.

Many older doctors remain sharp, their skills up-to-date and their judgment honed by years of experience. Peter Carmel, the AMA's immediate past president, a 75-year-old pediatric neurosurgeon in New Jersey, recently wrote about "going full tilt."

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