Certain Medical Procedures May Be Useless

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We usually assume that new medical procedures and drugs are adopted because they are better. But a new analysis has found that many new techniques and medicines are either no more effective than the old ones, or worse. Moreover, many doctors persist in using practices that have been shown to be useless or harmful.

Scientists reviewed each issue of The New England Journal of Medicine from 2001 through 2010 and found 363 studies examining an established clinical practice. In 146 of them, the currently used drug or procedure was found to be either no better, or even worse, than the one previously used. The report appears in the August issue of Mayo Clinic Proceedings.

More than 40 percent of established practices studied were found to be ineffective or harmful, 38 percent beneficial, and the remaining 22 percent unknown. Among the practices found to be ineffective or harmful were the routine use of hormone therapy in postmenopausal women; high-dose chemotherapy and stem cell transplant, a complex and expensive treatment for breast cancer that was found to be no better than conventional chemotherapy; and intensive glucose lowering in Type 2 diabetes patients in intensive care, which not only failed to reduce cardiovascular events but actually increased mortality.

In some instances, doctors routinely refused to give beneficial therapies despite a lack of evidence that they were harmful. Vaccines were unnecessarily withheld from multiple sclerosis patients in the belief that they increased flare-ups; women with lupus were denied oral contraceptives for fear they increased the severity of the disease; and epidural anesthesia was delayed during childbirth on the theory it increased the rate of Caesarean sections. Yet good studies showed that none of these fears was justified...

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