How Should A Physician Apologize After A Medical Error?

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I had thought that apologizing was a straightforward act, but I now realize that it is a nuanced art form. We've all heard the "mistakes were made" version, usually issued by politicians who attempt to insert a layer of passive voice insulation between themselves and their screw-ups.

There is also the ever present conditional apology which by definition falls short of complete responsibility acceptance. The template here is: "I'm sorry for my oversight which wouldn't have happened if …"

There have been several apologies in the news recently. First, President Obama offered a faux mea culpa with regard to his indisputable and repeated "misrepresentations" on his broken promise that we could all keep our own doctors and health insurance plans.

Here's what he said: "I am sorry that they are finding themselves in this situation based on assurance they got from me."

Finding themselves? Really? I grade this as beyond lame on the apology scale.

CBS's flagship and enduring news magazine *60 Minutes* apologized for using a source on a Benghazi piece who was a liar.

"We were wrong to put him on the air," said Lara Logan a few days prior to airing a formal apology. The latter included, "It was a mistake to include him in our report. For that, we are very sorry."

While some have criticized this apology as inadequate, I am more lenient here. They

admitted they screwed up, apologized and didn't blame anyone for their mess up. Sure, they could have fallen harder on their sword or fired a few folks, but I think they crossed the minimum standard for contrition and acceptance of responsibility.

Recently, a newspaper issued a retraction for comments published 150 years ago. The *Patriot-News*, a Pennsylvania newspaper earlier this month issued a retraction for referring to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as "silly remarks." Their recent editorial included the statement: "The *Patriot-News* regrets the error." I congratulate them on reaching this belated, enlightened position. They certainly cannot be accused of a rush to judgment. Let's look for other retractions from them for other errant opinions they published in the 19th century.

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