Four Reasons Why Hospitals Can Be Very Dangerous Places To Be

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Hospitals are commonly thought of as the safest place to be for sick people.

Patients have around-the-clock access to skilled care teams. Their vital signs are continuously monitored. A physician stops by every morning to check on them.

While it all sounds safe, a hospital can be a very dangerous place to be. Here are four frightening risks hospitals pose, along with their causes and some easy-to-implement solutions that could save hundreds of thousands of lives each year:

1. Hospital stays may cause psychological harm. Hospitals are intended to maximize the health of sick people. But the ways that hospitals are designed can severely disorient patients.

Beaming florescent lights, beeping machines and loud hallway conversations disrupt natural sleep patterns. Patients are routinely awakened at night for status checks and early in the morning for blood draws. Food is withheld while doctors await tests – and is often unappealing whenever it's served.

These deviations from day-to-day norms can disrupt any patient's psyche. But hospital stays can be particularly devastating for elderly patients [1].

The combination of sleep deprivation, poor nourishment and sedative medications can produce progressive deterioration in a patient's mental status.

Each year, 20 percent of elderly patients in hospitals develop delirium [2] and 1 of 6 die as a result [3].

2. Hospital stays can lead to physical harm. The risk of physical harm runs through even the safest hospitals as patients are given powerful narcotics or sedatives, which cause confusion and make it difficult for them to walk safely. One study found patients who fell during their hospital stay [4] were nearly three times more likely to have received a sedative.

Meanwhile, individuals on mandated bed rest face the risks of significant muscle weakness [5], even among the youngest and healthiest patients. Lack of regular physical activity during bed rest increases the risk of bone fractures, stiffened joints and, in some cases, contractures (where stiff joints become permanently bent).

But not all physical risks are external. Germs that can cause serious infectious diseases [6] are prevalent in hospital environments. Worse, they often prove to be resistant to even the most potent antibiotics.

3. Hospital stays increase the risk of avoidable conditions. Over a decade ago, the Institute of Medicine reported that up to 98,000 people a year [7] die in hospitals because of medical error. These deaths can occur from the wrong patient receiving a medication, a patient receiving the wrong medication or a miscalculated dose.

This alarming statistic did not include the patients who experienced other complications as a result of their hospital care. Such complications may include developing a pressure ulcer, falling on the way to the bathroom, or acquiring a systemic infection through an intravenous line. These kinds of complications affect as many as 4 to 5 percent of all hospitalized patients [8].

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