

NEWS

US doctors are sometimes economical with the truth, survey shows

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Most US doctors believe that they should be open and honest with patients, but a substantial number acknowledge that they do not always practise what they preach, says a new study published in *Health Affairs* (doi:10.1377/hlthaff.2010.1137).

About a third of doctors did not always inform patients of serious medical errors or disclose financial relationships with drug and device companies, the study found.

More than a 10th (11.3%) admitted to telling patients something that was not true.

The findings are drawn from analysis of 1891 responses (64.4% response rate) to a 2009 survey of doctors in family practice and four specialties (cardiology, general surgery, psychiatry, and anaesthesiology).

Open and honest communication between doctors and patients is a cornerstone of the 2002 Charter on Medical Professionalism, which has been endorsed by more than 100 professional associations.

Anaesthesiologists, general surgeons, and paediatricians were most likely to report being completely honest about patients' prognoses, while internists and psychiatrists were least likely ($P<0.05$). Cardiologists and general surgeons were most likely

to have been truthful with patients in the previous year, while paediatricians and psychiatrists were least likely ($P<0.001$).

Doctors' honesty about their financial links to industry is likely to gain a higher public profile in 2013 when the Physician Payment Sunshine Act of 2009 comes into force. Under the act, companies will be required to report payments to doctors that are greater than \$10 (£6.3; €7.5).

The study also found differences between doctors who worked in larger and smaller practices. Those at universities or medical centres were more likely to support the need to report all serious medical errors than were doctors in smaller practices (78% versus 61% ($P=0.03$)).

Female doctors were more likely than male doctors to adhere to charter principles of truthfulness and openness with patients.

White and Asian respondents were less likely than doctors from other ethnic minority groups to report attitudes consistent with the charter on questions of truthfulness and disclosure of confidential information.

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