

Institute for Safe Medication Practices

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ISMP Survey Shows Healthcare Practitioners Expect Punitive Action from State Boards Following Errors

HUNTINGDON VALLEY, Pa.— Results from a recently published survey by the Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP) has revealed that despite widespread recognition that placing blame and doling out punishment for medical mistakes are counterproductive to patient safety, health care providers still fear punitive action from their licensing boards in the wake of a medication error.

More than 1,500 licensed healthcare providers, including physicians, pharmacists, registered nurses (RNs), and licensed practical nurses (LPNs) responded to the survey. Of those respondents, 93% believed that their licenses would be restricted in some fashion if they were involved in a fatal medication error. At least one in three respondents thought their license would be placed on probation (41%) or suspended (33%), and about one in five (19%) thought it would be revoked. If an error involved a policy violation, 39% of respondents thought they would receive a written reprimand, 40% believed remedial education would be required, and almost half (47%) felt action would be taken against their license.

Surprisingly, 30% of respondents felt they would receive a verbal or written reprimand, or be required to obtain remedial education even if the error never reached the patient. While a reprimand may not seem as punitive as license restrictions, these actions still often become part of a healthcare professional's licensing records, at least temporarily.

Punitive actions were anticipated more often among the respondents who had experienced a medication error that had been reported to their licensing body in the last five years. This group also felt that there would be greater penalties against their licenses, suggesting that healthcare providers indeed may have cause to worry.

Overall, physician respondents expected less punitive action from their licensing boards than pharmacists and nurses, particularly for intercepted or minor errors. LPNs expected the most punitive action from their boards, regardless of the type or severity of the error. Pharmacists and physicians anticipated less remedial education than nurses for potentially harmful errors and policy violations.

These results describe a disconnect between healthcare providers' anticipated response to an error by their licensing boards and advice from national safety experts and the 1999 landmark Institute of Medicine report *To Err is Human*, which clearly refute the value of punishment for unintentional acts such as errors. Fear of punishment from licensing bodies may greatly contribute to the underreporting of medication errors and hinder efforts to understand their causes. Hopefully there will be positive changes within the healthcare professional licensing boards in the future as the overall culture of safety evolves.

The attached ISMP newsletter provides more details on the survey; you can also access a more general summary of the results online at <http://www.ismp.org/MSAarticles/20050519.htm>. Please contact ISMP media relations at 704-321-3343 or rbrehio@ismp.org for more information or to arrange interviews.

About ISMP: The Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP) is a 501c(3) nonprofit organization that works closely with healthcare practitioners and institutions, regulatory agencies, consumers, and professional organizations to provide education about medication errors and their prevention. ISMP represents nearly 30 years of experience in helping healthcare practitioners keep patients safe, and continues to lead efforts to improve the medication use process. In 2004, the Institute celebrated the 10th anniversary of its official incorporation as a nonprofit organization. For more information on ISMP, or its medication safety alert newsletters for healthcare professionals and consumers, visit www.ismp.org

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