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Seniors vulnerable to increasing number of medication errors

Distracted health care workers account for majority of mistakes

Independence, Mo. – June 7, 2004 – A recent study documents that the elderly are disproportionately at risk of falling victim to medication errors, particularly if they are confined in a hospital or nursing home. Older, confined patients are more likely than other segments of the population to be on several medications at once, increasing the chance of harmful drug interaction and other medication errors.

Douglas R. Horn, founder of the Horn Law Firm in Independence, has seen the effects of such mistakes first-hand through his work on behalf of elderly clients. His experience corresponds to a recent study of nearly 500 hospitals that reports the number of medication errors is on the rise, especially those involving geriatric (defined as over the age of 65) patients. The study reported a “large upsurge” in drug errors, which were up 80 percent although facilities reporting the errors grew by only 30 percent. And the number-one cause of error was attributed to “performance deficit” – in other words, human error.

These findings were announced in the fourth annual release of results from a database run by United States Pharmacopeia (USP), a nonprofit group of pharmacists and other health care professionals that develops standards for prescription drug use and monitors medication errors. In 2002, the year of the latest study, USP received 192,477 reports of medication errors to its database compiled anonymously from 482 hospitals and health care facilities.

More than one-third of the medication errors reported in 2002 involved older patients. Additionally, more than half of the deaths reported as a result of medication errors occurred in geriatric patients.

“I’ve found that the elderly are less likely to question the health care professional dispensing their medications,” said Horn, lead attorney of Horn Law. “Seniors and their family need to become more involved in their care, because health care staffing issues such as floating staff and substitute nurses continue to cause medication errors.”

Horn recommends that elderly patients or a relative ask the following questions to help avoid medication errors:

- What are the names of the medications being dispensed?
- Why is a particular medication being prescribed?
- How long will the medication need to be taken?
- How will the new medication interact with my other medications?
- What are the side effects of this medication?

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“If a health care worker caring for an elderly person cannot answer these questions, that’s a red flag that the medication regimen should be reviewed by the responsible doctor,” said Horn.

Horn Law has been helping victims of serious personal injury recover full and fair compensation for their injuries since 1990. Because the firm concentrates its practice in the area of injury law, Horn Law attorneys can devote unprecedented personal attention and resources to each client. Clients also benefit from Horn Law professionals’ combined 20 years of experience. Horn is a member of the Kansas City Metropolitan Bar Association, the Missouri Association of Trial Attorneys and the American Trial Lawyers Association.

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