

Getting Medicine Right: Overcoming the Problem of Overscreening, Overdiagnosis, and Overtreatment

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► See related editorial on page 22.

In a widely publicized 1999 report, the Institute of Medicine estimated that as many as 98,000 Americans die each year from preventable medical errors, and that

is just those occurring in hospitals.¹ That would make this unreported phenomenon the sixth leading cause of death in the United States, ahead of Alzheimer disease and diabetes mellitus. In response to this and similar concerns, there has been an unprecedented international effort to combat the problems of medical errors and overtreatment, with multiple like-minded strategies in place (*Table 1*).²⁻⁴

Of course, practicing good medicine and avoiding unnecessary harm have always been principles of medical practice. But, along with the evidence-based medicine ►

Table 1. Selected Resources for Best Practices: Avoiding Unnecessary and Potentially Harmful Medical Care

Source	Sponsor	Comments
Choosing Wisely campaign http://www.choosingwisely.org	American Board of Internal Medicine Foundation	More than 200 recommendations from more than 60 medical societies
Choosing Wisely search tool ² http://www.aafp.org/afp/recommendations/search.htm	<i>American Family Physician</i>	Interactive search tool of primary care recommendations from the Choosing Wisely campaign Also featured on: Twitter: https://twitter.com/AFPJournal Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/AFPJournal AFP Home page: http://www.aafp.org/afp
Choosing Wisely public campaign http://consumerreports.org/cro/health/doctors-and-hospitals/choosing-wisely/index.htm	<i>Consumer Reports</i>	Patient-oriented information to make better treatment decisions
Less Is More series ³ http://jamanetwork.com/collection.aspx?categoryid=6017	<i>JAMA Internal Medicine</i>	Articles, commentaries, and firsthand accounts of ways to reduce unnecessary care
Too Much Medicine series ⁴ http://www.bmj.com/too-much-medicine	<i>British Medical Journal</i>	Publications and links to other resources
High Value Care program https://hvc.acponline.org/physres.html	American College of Physicians	Resources for physicians, including publications
RightCare Alliance http://lowninstitute.org/take-action/join-the-right-care-alliance/	Lown Institute	Personal stories of both good care and inadequate care
Preventing Overdiagnosis Conference http://www.preventingoverdiagnosis.net	Various	The 2015 conference will be hosted by the National Institutes of Health's National Cancer Institute

Information from references 2 through 4.

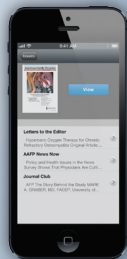
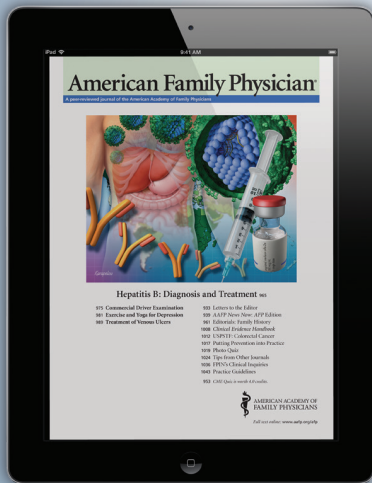
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movement and the application of best evidence to inform collaborative treatment decisions, there is a new emphasis on reducing practices that are likely to have limited benefit and potential harm. As an indication of this, a recent PubMed search showed that there were 261 articles with the word “overtreatment” in the title; the first was from 1929, but there were only 20 or so articles until the 1970s, with 168 (64%) of them being from 2000 onward. Similarly, there were 395 articles with the word “overdiagnosis” in the title; the first one was from 1973, with 327 (83%) of them being from 2000 onward. And the word “overscreening” appeared in only five citations, the earliest was from 2010. Clearly, medical overuse is a topic of growing clinical importance.⁵

American Family Physician is committed to being part of this movement to practice sound medicine, improve patient safety, and reduce harm. Our series of editorials on overscreening, overdiagnosis, and overtreatment, authored by AFP Deputy Editor Dr. Mark Ebell, outlines the challenges of too much medicine and provides practical guidance on reducing unnecessary medical practices.⁶⁻⁸ We encourage you to explore our Choosing Wisely search tool (<http://www.aafp.org/afp/recommendations/search.htm>), and welcome your suggestions for ways to help family physicians continue to provide the best care for their patients.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr. Siwek is editor of AFP.

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