

# **Medical students' experiences with medical errors: an analysis of medical student essays**

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## **OBJECTIVE:**

This study aimed to examine medical students' experiences with medical errors.

## **METHODS:**

In 2001 and 2002, 172 fourth-year medical students wrote an anonymous description of a significant medical error they had witnessed or committed during their clinical clerkships. The assignment represented part of a required medical ethics course. We analyzed 147 of these essays using thematic content analysis.

## **RESULTS:**

Many medical students made or observed significant errors. In either situation, some students experienced distress that seemingly went unaddressed. Furthermore; this distress was sometimes severe and persisted after the initial event. Some students also experienced considerable uncertainty as to whether an error had occurred and how to prevent future errors. Many errors may not have been disclosed to patients, and some students who desired to discuss or disclose errors were apparently discouraged from doing so by senior doctors. Some students criticized senior doctors who attempted to hide errors or avoid responsibility. By contrast, students who witnessed senior doctors take responsibility for errors and candidly disclose errors to patients appeared to recognize the importance of honesty and integrity and said they aspired to these standards.

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

There are many missed opportunities to teach students how to respond to and learn from errors. Some faculty members and house staff may at times respond to errors in ways that appear to contradict professional standards. Medical educators should increase exposure to exemplary responses to errors and help students to learn from and cope with errors.

## **KEYWORDS:**

\*medical errors; \*clinical clerkship; teaching/ methods; students, medical/\*psychology; humans; stress, psychological/etiology; ethics, medical/\*education.