

## Part B Insider (Multispecialty) Coding Alert

### STUDIES & SURVEYS: It's Only Wise to Apologize

Physicians might not be giving their patients the information or emotional support they need after harmful medical errors, according to a study in the Feb. 26 Journal of the American Medical Association (2003;289:1001-1007).

Researchers led by **Thomas Gallagher** at the **University of Washington School of Medicine** surveyed 13 focus groups, including 52 patients and 46 physicians. An analysis of the transcripts found both physicians and patients weren't having their needs met following medical errors.

Patients wanted to find out about any harmful medical errors that occurred. They wanted to know what happened, why it happened, how the practitioner will mitigate the error's consequences and how to prevent recurrences.

Physicians agreed with patients that they should disclose harmful errors, but said they "choose their words carefully" when revealing errors to patients. Physicians who revealed mishaps to patients often avoided going into details, including the fact that someone made a mistake. They would also avoid explaining why the error occurred and how they would prevent it from happening again.

Patients felt they needed emotional support from physicians, including apologies, following a medical error. But physicians worried that an apology could create legal liabilities. Physicians reported feeling upset after medical errors occurred, but they didn't know where to seek emotional support, the JAMA study stated.

Medical errors are unavoidable despite practitioners' best efforts, and ethicists recommend letting patients know when they happen. But physicians often don't know how to disclose errors to patients, JAMA pointed out.