

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO ADVERSE OUTCOMES ARISING FROM MEDICAL ERROR

CMDA recognizes that adverse outcomes arising from medical errors occur. Our response to adverse outcomes requires compassion, a prompt sympathetic response that expresses regret, our wish that it had not happened, and provision of appropriate medical care. With any adverse outcome, the patient should be assured of an expeditious and thorough evaluation and an honest explanation upon its completion. As Christian healthcare professionals we desire to respond to our mistakes in a manner that is just and that honors God. We may recognize error when a patient is injured by our care, although many injuries are not due to error and, thankfully, many errors do not lead to injury.¹

Upon discovering an error, we must distinguish our level of responsibility and culpability before God.² This necessitates time to prayerfully reflect while relying on the Spirit and the Word of God to both make us aware and convict us, if a sinful action³ or attitude⁴ led to the error, whether by omission or commission.

Errors typically fall within three categories.

1. Errors for which we are not directly responsible
An example would be medical system errors. In that setting, we should work to prevent future occurrence.
2. Errors for which we are responsible but not morally culpable⁵
If we conclude there was no moral failure, we need not be self-accusatory but respond in compassion. Errors with adverse outcomes for which we are responsible but not morally culpable engender an obligation to disclose the error to the injured party. We must recognize the complexity of disclosure.⁶ In addition, we must take necessary steps to prevent recurrence of the error.
3. Errors for which we are both responsible and morally culpable⁷
If the error resulted from moral failure Scripture speaks of the following steps that should be prayerfully considered:
 - a. Repentance: We must recognize and acknowledge our sin, and with genuine contrition determine not to repeat the sin while taking specific steps to guard against it.⁸
 - b. Confession: Scripture requires that we confess our sins to God.⁹ It is wise for Christian physicians to have a small group of fellow believers to whom they are accountable.¹⁰
 - c. Restitution: There is biblical precedent for restitution.¹¹ Malpractice insurance may be one source of restitution. There may be times when compensation is appropriate, but our malpractice carrier does not agree, and

we may need to personally offer some form of redress.

- d. Forgiveness: God's forgiveness is freely given to us through Christ when we repent and confess our sins to Him. Confession and/or restitution, when appropriate, provides an opportunity to seek forgiveness from the injured party. One goal we have as Christians is to live peacefully with all, which may not be accomplished until there has been mutual forgiveness.¹² Some patients may have difficulty ever forgiving; for others the timing may not be right. We must respect these feelings.
- e. Thanksgiving: Dealing with sin and experiencing reconciliation based on forgiveness from God and others should lead to thanksgiving for the renewed relationship and should facilitate our worship.¹³

Conclusion

We live in a world that is fundamentally flawed by sin. As Christian healthcare professionals we are called to do good. In spite of our best preparations, intentions, and efforts, medical errors and adverse outcomes occur. Whether or not we are morally culpable, we need God's help to respond rightly to our errors.

1 <http://iom.edu/Reports/1999/To-Err-is-Human-Building-A-Safer-Health-System.aspx>

2 Psalm 19:12 "Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults."
Psalm 139:23-24 "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

3 Sinful actions may include such things as causing physical or emotional harm by malicious anger, gossip, lying, taking sexual liberty with a patient, or causing harm while under the influence of alcohol or another abused substance.

4 Mistakes that rise from sinful attitudes frequently require increased sensitivity to the convicting prompts of God's Spirit. It may be that the mistake was made because we were too busy. Is that wrong? Perhaps so. As Christians, we must pray that God would show us the cause of our failure. Were we too busy because of pride or greed? Could selfishness, lust, sinful anger or innumerable other sinful attitudes have contributed to the mistake?

5 Medicine by its very nature will involve adverse outcomes. In spite of doing our best mistakes will be made, a lung cancer will be diagnosed as pneumonia, a common bile duct will be nicked during a cholecystectomy. These errors are unfortunate but would rarely be the result of sin in the life of the physician and therefore involve no moral culpability.

6 If we confess to the injured party we may ease our own conscience yet put others (including our malpractice carrier) in jeopardy who may not share our personal sense of guilt. Our legal system is helpful in determining social culpability and it may not be appropriate to confess to the injured party till this has been determined.

7 Moral culpability implies a sinful attitude or action leading up to the error.

8 Acts 3:19-20a “Repent then, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.” Acts 26:20b “...that they should repent and turn to God performing deeds in keeping with repentance.”

9 1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

10 James 5:16 “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another.”

11 Exodus 21:18-19 If men quarrel and one hits the other with a stone or with his fist and he does not die but is confined to bed, [19] the one who struck the blow will not be held responsible if the other gets up and walks around outside with his staff; however, he must pay the injured man for the loss of his time and see that he is completely healed.

12 Romans 12:18 “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

13 Matthew 5:23-24 “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

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