

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Misdiagnosed Illnesses are Fairly Common”

The idea of a misdiagnosed disease can terrify a physician and give him nightmares concerning a malpractice lawsuit. Some diseases and conditions are more difficult to diagnose than others. While the overall rate of diagnostic error is reliably estimated at around five percent, these illnesses are much easier to miss or to misdiagnosis. As such, it is extremely important for patients to seek a second medical opinion to confirm them. However, the error seems remarkably common, with some estimates pegging misdiagnoses among 12 million Americans, or 1 in every 20 patients, each year. Because it is an illness that can present common symptoms, cancer is the most misdiagnosed disease. According to the Journal of Clinical Oncology, doctors may miss or misdiagnose certain types of cancer up to 44 percent of the time. Heart attacks often are mistaken for anxiety or indigestion and a cardiac episode can be deadly without timely treatment. Patients should insist on a second medical opinion if they have any doubts or questions about their heart health. Failure to correctly diagnose a stroke is one of the most common occurrences. In 2% to 26% of patients, stroke is under-diagnosed (i.e., false-negative cases or “stroke chameleons”), and in 30% to 43% of patients, stroke is over-diagnosed (i.e., false-positive cases or “stroke mimics”). Still, physicians should be on the lookout for stroke because time is of the essence. Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is also commonly misdiagnosed. Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is marked by altered bowel habits with abdominal pain devoid of an organic pathological process or specific motility/structural abnormalities. Change in bowel habits, with diarrhea, constipation, or both, is the main symptom in IBS. This condition is the most common reason for referral to a gastroenterologist. Carpal tunnel syndrome (which involves impingement of the median nerve at the wrist) can easily be confused with thoracic outlet syndrome. However, the co-occurrence of these two syndromes in a single patient is extremely rare. Thoracic outlet syndrome is a constellation of disorders marked by abnormal compression of arterial, venous, or neural structures in the base of the neck. Symptoms rarely develop until adulthood, and typically result from impingement of the brachial plexus. They include pain, paresthesia, and numbness. Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) and rheumatoid arthritis (RA) are both systemic autoimmune diseases that attack the body, leading to inflammation and tissue damage and are commonly misdiagnosed. Also, many doctors lack the training needed to properly diagnose and treat mental illnesses. Often mistaken and dismissed as a mood or phase, people with depression can have a hard time finding the help they need.

In the America that I love, our doctors struggle to provide accurate diagnoses. We must provide all pertinent information to them.

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