



MANITOBA INSTITUTE
FOR PATIENT SAFETY

Make It Personal: Interview Series

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An Interview with Dr. Karine Lavasseur

Dr. Karine Lavasseur is an Associate professor in the Department of Political Studies. She is really interested in accountability, such as ensuring accountability of government officials. Along with Dr. Fiona MacDonald of the University of the Fraser Valley, Karine has started to research the accountability of health care professionals. With support from the Dr. John Wade Patient Safety Initiatives Grant, Karine and Fiona have learned a lot about how medical apology that can be directly put into practice by health care professionals and organizations to improve patient care.



Apology Brings Healing

Karine and Fiona initially became interested in medical apology because of a personal experience. One of their family members experienced a medical error, and their family was fortunate to experience the emotional power of an apology in this case. Karine says, "The doctor immediately apologized, described in detail what went wrong, and the power of that apology brought some healing to the confusion, anger, and hurt feelings. Having witnessed this, we felt that more research is needed into the role that medical apologies play in patient safety."

Patient Safety Includes Apology

For Karine, patient safety is about taking reasonable steps to reduce the chance of errors occurring, such as examining systems, processes, and embedding checks and double checks. But, in the case that something goes wrong despite these processes, there needs to be a proper meaningful apology to the patient. And taking things even a step further, Karine feels that patients also need to be offered compensation proactively when that is appropriate. Karine gives the example of a self-employed individual who missed three days of work because of a medication error. That individual should receive an apology, but also needs financial compensation for her missed work.



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Learning from Professionals and Patients

The care providers that Karine interviewed to learn more about medical apology echoed Karine's own personal experience. Patients consistently say that medical apology is important and powerful. They share that it can help with healing, and help repair the relationship between the patient and the health care personnel, as well as bring closure to the situation.

Karine has been inspired by the dedication of the patients that she has interviewed to learn more about medical apology. Karine says, "our patient partners in this research have such a strong commitment to contribute to change. The patients we interviewed who experienced a medical error have become such strong advocates to make sure that others are protected from the harms they have experienced."

Not Just Any Apology Will Do

Karine is dedicated to spreading the word about what makes a good apology because she has seen from the people she has interviewed how important it is for the apology to be done well. "When an apology isn't meaningful, the patient is re-traumatized. An apology needs to be meaningful, empathetic, timely and done in-person to prevent more trauma." In addition, when apologizing, health practitioners should strive to clearly communicate what happened, and who was responsible. They should also make a commitment to prevent the mistake from happening again. And last but not least, health practitioners never underestimate the power of using the word "sorry" in an accountable way.

Karine is clear that apology is not the only answer to improving patient safety. "Medical apology is not a panacea, it is not what we should be relying on, we still need to invest a lot of time and energy into those processes and systems and checks at the forefront to prevent the error from happening in the first place." But Karine hopes that those that do end up experience medical apology will have the same experience that she did – a meaningful apology that allowed her family to feel acknowledged, and helped them move on.

Karine and Fiona's work also has shed some light on why despite [apology legislation](#), and the benefits of apology, there continue to be barriers to apologizing for health professionals. You can read more about this in [their article on "The Conversation"](#). You can also find further perspective on apology legislation in this [interview with Ron Guse](#).

The Manitoba Institute for Patient Safety (MIPS) is an independent, not-for-profit corporation established in 2004 to promote and coordinate activities that improve patient safety and enhance quality healthcare in Manitoba.

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