Apology and Communication - Position Statement

To err is human. That is, mistakes are an inevitable reality of the human condition. It is critical to keep in mind that health care providers are human too — and they make mistakes. The way in which they approach their mistakes is what matters the most.

The importance of trust and communication

Timely and meaningful communication between health care providers and their patients is imperative when an adverse outcome* occurs. This includes an apology of regret,** which is fundamental to maintaining a respectful, trusting and open relationship. An apology is a powerful and essential component in the healing process for patients, families and clinicians alike.

Recommended best practices

MMIC and UMIA promote responsible and timely communication between health care providers and their patients. A crucial component of responsible communication and promoting and maintaining trust is timely follow-up after an adverse outcome.

We recommend the prompt report to us of any adverse outcome. We recommend prompt performance of an internal investigation, with our involvement, to determine whether the standard of care was met, and if not, whether harm was caused. During this process, keep both the patient and the involved health care provider informed about the investigation. If it is determined that the standard of care was met, share this information and answer any questions they have.

If it is determined that the standard of care was not met and harm resulted, move forward with resolution discussions among all parties: the health care system, the principal provider, the patient, the patient’s lawyer and the professional liability carrier. The goal is resolution that provides mutual satisfaction.

Communication about adverse outcomes and responsible, timely disclosure promote a transparent and just culture. The goal is to do the right thing so that all involved parties feel good about how the situation was handled. Thus, the devastation is minimized, as much as that is possible. There are no feelings of betrayal due to lack of transparency or lack of honesty—rather, there is healing—and a facilitation of trust, credibility and integrity between the patient and the health care provider.

Another important result of this process is the opportunity to learn from adverse outcomes in order to prevent such outcomes from reoccurring. By working together, by communicating openly and honestly, and by learning from our mistakes, we will provide better health care for all. And that, after all, is our goal.

* An adverse outcome is an injury caused by medical management and not by the patient’s underlying condition.

**An apology of regret is an apology for the occurrence of the adverse outcome. It is not an apology indicating culpability. An apology of remorse is an apology where responsibility is taken for the deviation from the standard of care and the resultant harm.