A healthier health system is ours to create

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Our collective business is health, and we are ostensibly the health experts. As a group, health-care professionals take great pride in providing high-quality care. Yet we face two serious health issues: we have a staggering number of preventable adverse events, and we are among the unhealthiest of all workers.

Between 9,000 and 24,000 Canadian patients die annually from adverse events; a third of these deaths are preventable. Something goes wrong in one out of 13 hospital stays — 185,000 errors annually. The enormity of the problem is overwhelming. The impact on patients and their families is tragic. Even if they don't die, many patients must manage a chronic condition for the rest of their lives and never return to full capacity.

Human capital constitutes two-thirds of our health-care delivery system assets. Leaders have an obligation to create healthy environments for the dedicated people who choose to work in health care. Healthier workplace environments increase resiliency, adaptability, creativity, satisfaction, morale and productivity, all of which lead to safer care and lower costs to the system and taxpayers.

Our health-care workforce has a high rate of occupational injury and absence. An extraordinary percentage of payroll is lost to long-term disability, injuries and sick leave. But absenteeism is not the whole measure of lost productivity and quality. There is also the *presenteeism* of the walking wounded — those who continue to work but are physically, cognitively or emotionally impaired by illness, injury and work culture. In the absence of focused and immediate attention to the widespread challenges in health-care settings, safety and quality are the first casualties for providers and patients.

A new vision of health care is slowly evolving — the change from a system of siloed organizations and command-control hierarchies to one that is used by, owned by, co-created with and responsive to the community in which it operates. The new vision embodies a system in which health-care providers, regardless of organizational affiliation or scope of practice, deliver safe, efficient and quality-driven client-focused services. The system is affordable and accessible, its quality built on the talent of front-line providers working interprofessionally. The public and patients are central, valued and active participants who have the information and tools they need to pursue wellness. They are no longer content to be nameless, faceless victims of patient safety failures; they ask questions about their safety. As owners of the system, they expect and deserve nothing less than excellence as the norm with respect to patient safety.

Many share this vision — indeed, who could oppose it? But articulation is far easier than implementation. We all know more than enough about achieving safer care; we must transform what we know into what we do and must overcome the "knowing-doing gap."

Collectively, we can change the future. Very bright people work in health care; some are intellectually gifted. We have created libraries of patient safety books, studies, research papers and commissions. We know what the future holds: an aging population and workforce combined with a significant change in the ethnic and linguistic character of society. We know the causes of many adverse events. We know we have a leadership gap and, generally, where the gap exists. Yes, we are making incremental progress, but the toll of harm continues to rise. Enough talking, reading and studying — it is time for urgent, aggressive and committed action from the front lines, management and leadership of health organizations and from governments. Policy should drive expectations, and colleagues must lead from above and below.

In a recent issue of *Healthcare Executive*, Maureen Bisognano, president and CEO of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, said, "Nurse involvement is essential to any significant healthcare improvement initiative, and it is fundamental to fulfilling the promise of healthcare reform, regardless of what shape that reform takes." I couldn't agree more.

We need to remind ourselves that within our health system, we have all the gifts we need to improve. The required skills, talents and potential are within your own health-care organization, department or unit. ∎