

The Power of Saying 'I'm Sorry'

By Judith A. Greenfield, PhD, RN

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Joel Greenberg, a plaintiff's malpractice attorney practicing in the state of Illinois, offers advice to physicians on how to avoid facing him, or his counterparts, in court. In "Conversations With the Enemy", an interview heard on the audio magazine *Second Opinion*, Volume I¹, Greenberg talks about the power of saying 'I'm sorry'. This is not to be confused, he says, with admitting guilt. He advises against that. But it's okay, even right, he says, to tell the patient that you are sorry things worked out the way they did.

Greenberg reports repeated instances where patients were able to resolve their animosity towards their doctors because those doctors had been good to them and told them what was happening. Despite strong cases, the patients refused to sue. For this reason, he believes:

"If you say you're sorry, in a meaningful way, to a patient, you will find the results to be staggering in your favor – as opposed to running away, hiding, evading and not being a real person with the patient."

Such advice may feel counterintuitive – and certainly difficult to do. But one case, described in a listserv email dated Oct. 13, 2001² (subject: "Honesty, A True Story"), provides valuable insight into why it often works. In it we learn of a woman who comes out of an eight-day coma after an artery was accidentally cut in a repeat surgery for a post-operative infection. Six years earlier, this woman had reacted vigorously to medical errors:

"I was lied to, things were covered-up and everyone denied everything. I felt angry and betrayed. I filed complaints, contacted the media and made a big fuss."

This time, however, was different:

"Will I do the same now...? No. I won't. I'm not angry, nor do I feel betrayed. Everyone was up front and honest with me. My surgeon freely admitted [what happened].... No cover-ups, No lies. They did the best they could. I survived."

At least for this patient, transparency made all the difference:

"My surgeon has never been sued. I now know why. It's not because he's perfect and has never made a mistake. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes. It's because he's honest and not afraid to admit his shortcomings."□

¹ *Second Opinion*, produced and edited by practicing physicians, is exclusively distributed by Connetics Corporation.

² Visit the [National Patient Safety Foundation](#). Follow links to the "Discussion Forum ListServ" and its archives.

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