

John M. Eisenberg, MD, MBA—A Physician Mentor in Patient Safety

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Seated around a large conference table at the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) in early 2000, our ears were still ringing with reverberations of the public impact of the late 1999 release of the Institute of Medicine's (IOM) report – To Err is Human. As representatives of Federal Agencies serving on the Quality Interagency Coordination (QuIC) Task Force, we had recently completed the QuIC Report to the President on Medical Errors. The report set out our Federal Agency responses to the To Err is Human report. Most of us seated around the table, although with years of experience in quality measurement and improvement, were new to the topic of patient safety – we had lots of questions and even more reservations. Our attention, however, was very quickly riveted on the presence of the leader sitting at the head of the table – the then AHRQ Director, John Eisenberg, MD, MBA. His intellect, spirit and serious commitment to reducing patient harm permeated the conference room – he raised highly cogent questions, and listened intently and with great respect to each person's comments. His obvious enthusiasm for protecting patients, and strong intellect came together in the form of a proposed plan forward. I, like others in the room, feeling reassured, came together as a team with a mission and tasks that each of us could accomplish. And most important of all, we left to return to our Federal Agencies with 'will' to move forward together.

Being trained as a physician epidemiologist, I was intrigued with John Eisenberg's characterization of the patient safety problem as an epidemic –and, one not limited geographically. His support for international collaboration in addressing patient safety, made it possible for us to learn from those working in patient safety in other countries. In serving on AHRQ research panels, it was not uncommon to find oneself seated next to James Reason or other prominent international leaders in patient safety. One could always count on John Eisenberg's making his way around the table to personally thank-you at the conclusion of the research panels – always linking one's participation with the goal of making patients safer.

As I experienced this extraordinary man highly skilled as an expert clinician, health services researcher, administrator and AHRQ Director, I recalled my first meeting with him at an Association for Health Services Research conference in Chicago in the early 1990s. I had been asked to be a commenter for a series of health services research papers dealing with practice guidelines – with John Eisenberg as one of the presenters. A day or so before the presentation, I had a call from John Eisenberg – after introducing himself – he indicated that he was very interested in my comments, and would really like to sit down with me in advance of the presentation so that he could be fully engaged with them in the discussion following the presentation. I met with him – and, I will always remember how he engaged with me with respect for my comments as a relatively newcomer to health services research. I felt like what I had to say counted – and, I aimed to be as careful and intellectually honest in my responses as he was in his work. In one very brief exposure, his superb mentoring skills had an enormous impact on my work – as he had on the careers of many skilled health services researchers, clinicians and administrators.

The experience of John Eisenberg that continues to move me in my patient safety work each day, however, was his talk at a meeting at AHRQ in early 2001. We were convened as administrative leaders in an Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) federal agency patient safety collaborative. He spoke with great conviction, and obvious intellectual and emotional

commitment, highlighting the responsibility each of us had for reducing patient harm. His words motivated me then – and, to this day. They have sustained my work in patient safety over the past eight years – initially as national lead for patient safety at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and now at the AMA. We all, patients and health care professionals, owe a great deal to Dr John Eisenberg!!

About the author

Dr. Kellie, a physician epidemiologist, is a patient safety and clinical quality improvement expert with national and international experience. She leads major AMA strategic initiatives and contributes to the AMA's patient safety program, Making Strides in Safety®.