

PROJECTED DISASTER
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"Our Hospitals Are Killing Us" says the cover headline on a recent *LOOK* magazine. And sure enough, with predictable alarm, every mishap from falling out of bed to going home after surgery with a stitch infection is breathlessly related in detail as a major disaster in the article.

According to the article, malpractice and incompetence are rampant in at least seven phases of hospital activity: asepsis, anesthesia, transfusion, medication, prevention of accidents, diagnostic and pre-operative workups by physicians, and protection from unnecessary surgery. The impression is successfully transmitted that if anyone is unfortunate enough to enter any hospital (except the Massachusetts General, which is eulogized as the country's best), his or her chance of encountering disaster in one or more of these fields is excellent.

We were more interested, however, in the technique of the article (itself, a run-of-the-mill general alarm using the scare tactic to belabor the obvious and promote magazine sales). The gimmick employed to full advantage by the writer is the "projected" statistic, whereby the small sample, carefully chosen for its horrible example, is transformed by extrapolation into a nationwide statistical monster. By this means the author discovers that "well over" 1,000,000 persons each year contract "infections" (unqualified, of course) simply as a result of their hospital stay. Anesthesia accounts for 33,000 "definitely" or "possibly" lost lives each year. More than 3,000 deaths occur, and up to 75,000 patients develop hepatitis because of transfusion errors. One million nonmedical accidents occur in hospitals annually, half of which happen to patients who fall out of "ill-designed" beds. Thirty-one percent of cases get negligent diagnosis and therapy. Twenty-four to "more than" fifty percent of surgical procedures (T&As, appendectomies, hysterectomies) are performed unnecessarily. Also discovered was one hospital in which 51,200 "projected" errors in giving medication occurred annually. This was possibly calculated from the example of one sad nurse who made five medication errors on one eight-hour shift (once, she gave two aspirins to a patient without an order). As long as we are at it, we wonder how many patients (hospital or otherwise) fell out of bed or suffered fatal coronary attacks while reading this article. All we need to find is one or two, project this with the number of patients in the country on a given day, and we might come up with the "appalling" finding that 500,001 patients die annually on reading scare articles in *LOOK* Magazine. It's a national disgrace.