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Becoming a competent doctor: ongoing responsibilities

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REFLECTION:

Becoming a competent doctor: ongoing responsibilities

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I wrote an article on the use of intravenous estrogen to treat abnormal uterine bleeding for this issue of *Clinical Research in Practice*. This was the first time I had critically appraised a research paper for publication. After spending some time reviewing the research article, I realized that the study itself contained a number of serious flaws. For example, the authors counted two patients from the placebo group as having failed therapy when, in fact, they were lost to follow-up and their bleeding statuses remained unknown. In doing so, the authors accentuated the difference between placebo and estrogen, which led to a misrepresentation of the results. Although I remained firm in my belief that the study was flawed, I was hesitant to make such a claim in the first draft of my article without a peer review performed by more experienced clinicians.

Furthermore, I found it alarming that this frequently cited 1982 article—one that now constitutes the basis of current recommendations—could feature such a serious error that has gone undetected for an extended period of time. What I suspect happened was this: once the treatment was established, the article stopped being critically appraised by physicians. One other contributing factor may have been the significant pressure on physicians' time: many simply may not have thought it worthwhile to reappraise a 30-year-old article. However, as a medical student on my second clinical rotation, I realized how much my knowledge paled in comparison to that of the practicing physicians. It was this readily apparent gap in knowledge that swayed me to temper my stance on this article, as I wanted to be absolutely sure about my conclusions before going against 30 years of medical practice.

The lesson I learned from this is that as a physician, I must always be vigilant and approach research articles critically. I hope never to make the mistake of citing flawed research studies and misrepresenting them as truth.

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