



MedStar Health
Institute for Quality and Safety

How to Stay Safe When Entering the Healthcare System: A Physician Walks across the Country to Raise Awareness of the Need to Improve Healthcare Safety

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Introduction:

Like many of my colleagues, I have been fighting for a safer healthcare system for three decades, one that does not lose 250,000 patients each year to preventable medical harm. One that does not have healthcare workforce injuries, depression, suicide, and burnout rates higher than almost every other industry. After spending a significant portion of my professional career trying to improve patient safety, not much has changed.

So, in late February of 2020, I decided to approach this intractable problem from a different angle. I would do something outrageous to draw public attention to the current healthcare safety crisis. At sixty-seven years of age, while being treated for thyroid and prostate cancer, I outlined a plan to walk across America using my love for baseball and the Major League Baseball stadiums as anchors that I hoped would draw media attention to my mission.

With voice recorder in hand, I set out to raise awareness of the need to improve healthcare safety by sharing stories of patients and healthcare workers who lost their lives to preventable medical harm, many of their family members walking with me as I passed through their hometowns. Little did I know we would experience the worst pandemic in over a century shortly after I began my walk on February 28th in San Diego.

Results



Walk across America Results:

1. Walked 2,460 miles over 355 consecutive days during the pandemic.
2. Interviewed by over seventy-five television, radio, newspaper, and podcast outlets including *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, NPR, PBS and ESPN sports radio programs, raising awareness about the preventable harm crisis in healthcare.
3. Walked to 20 Major League Ballparks, fourteen spring training ballparks, and three minor league ballparks.
4. Drove 13,368 miles while visiting twenty-six different states.
5. Raised over \$40,000 for the Patient Safety Movement Foundation.
6. Used twelve pairs of Brooks running shoes over the course of the year.
7. Suffered two broken toes, recurrent back spasms, and associated hip and knee pains.

To all the patients, family members, healthcare workers, and friends who walked with me in memory of loved ones lost due to preventable medical harm. You kept my spirits high and provided energy on days I was dragging: Lisa Riegler, Barbara Black, Vonda Vaden-Bates, Carole Hemmelgarn, Lee Perreira, Dr. Art Kanowitz, Shelley Dierking, Dr. Wendy Madigosky, Tracy Pierce, Josh Pierce, Ellie Pierce, Lainey Pierce, Deahna Visscher, Marty Hatlie, Tracy Granzky, Steve Burrows, Margo Burrows, Soojin Jun, Greg Vass, Dr. Tim McDonald, Brad Schwartz, Chrissie Blackburn, Katie Carlin, Crystal Morales, Dr. Delbert Morales, Jack Gentry, Teresa Gentry, Dr. Raj Ratwani, Leah Binder, Armando Nahum, Angela Nahum, Debbie Zelinski, Brian Zelinski, Tony Galbo, Liz Galbo, Michelle Bennett, Joe Kiani, Ariana Longley, Dr. Bill Wilson, and Bernadette Wilson.

Conclusion

It was the kindness of strangers that reinforced there is much grace at the heart of humanity. No matter how hot, tired, or sore I was on any given leg of my walk, I would inevitably cross paths with someone who, despite their struggle in the world, offered a bottle of water, a cool towel, or a personal story that only reinforced my resolve to keep moving. What I experienced time and again talking with people from all walks of life, was that no matter our religion, our race, or our profession, we are more similar than we are different. Those that bring hatred, bigotry, and antisemitism in efforts to separate us are far fewer than those that want to bring love and unite us in common good.