

## A Father's Quest

**After his twins almost died in a medical accident, actor Dennis Quaid takes his mission to improve hospital safety worldwide.**

By **Claudia Kalb** | Newsweek Web Exclusive  
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In November 2007, Dennis Quaid's newborn twins, Zoe Grace and Thomas Boone, **nearly died from an overdose of the blood thinner** heparin at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. Since then, the actor has mounted a crusade against medical errors. Latest stop: the National Press Club, where on Monday Quaid talked about what happened to his children and what needs to be done to eradicate tragic mistakes. "My mission today is to drive awareness," Quaid said, "and my message is a call to action."

Quaid's appearance was timed to the release of a new report, Safe Practices for Better Healthcare, by the **National Quality Forum**. And he was there to plug his new documentary, too, *Chasing Zero: Winning the War on Healthcare Harm*, which premieres at a global summit on patient safety in Nice, France, later this month. But it was his personal story that captivated and horrified the audience. Until his twins' nightmarish experience, Quaid said he had always had faith in medical care. "Little did I know how dangerous any hospital can be," he said. On their tenth day of life, Quaid's twins, who were being treated for an infection, received a dose of heparin that was 1,000 times too high. This happened not once, but twice, turning their blood "to the consistency of water" and causing them to bleed profusely. After 41 hours and a lot of praying, Z.G. and T. Boone pulled out of the danger zone; today they are healthy.

Quaid says he doesn't blame individual doctors, he blames a health-care system that is ill equipped to prevent mistakes. NEWSWEEK senior writer Claudia Kalb spoke with Quaid one-on-one after his public appearance. Excerpts:

**Kalb: It's been more than 10 years since the Institute of Medicine published its landmark report on medical errors. But you say that many people remain unaware of the dangers.**

Quaid: Right, including leaders in health care. That's why I think my role is really to help raise awareness about the enormity of the problem because I'm a known person and I can be a voice for so many people. What I found is that all of us have a loved one, or this happened to us, or [we] have a friend who has been the victim of some kind of health-care harm. The problem is that it happens over thousands of hospitals in this country every day. But they happen one at a time, these incidents. Whereas when you have an airline crash, it's national news



because it's such a huge event. People in hospitals die. It goes unnoticed.

**You say your wife had a strong intuition that something was wrong the night your twins were given the overdose. What happened?**

That was very strange. I just think it was a woman's intuition. I had just called, not an hour before, to check on the kids. She, just out of the blue, knew something was wrong. She even wrote down the time for some reason and that happened to be the time that we found out later that we discovered that our twins were bleeding profusely.

**When you called the first time, they said everything was fine?**

They said everything was fine. And then when I called the second time, they said everything was fine too, by the way.

**That was in the middle of the night?**

Yeah, actually our twins weren't fine when we called the second time. We were just told that they were fine. They knew what was going on. But they had been told by our pediatrician that he had made a parental decision that we were exhausted and not to be disturbed. Even though we had left explicit instructions that if anything happened, we were to be called immediately. We found out [what happened] when we went in early the next morning.

**What happened to the nurse who administered the overdose?**

I really don't know. We didn't meet with her afterwards. There were several nurses involved. I don't blame any of the nurses. They're overworked, underappreciated. The reason they get into health care to begin with is they're there to ease human suffering and they really do care. They're great people; they're heroes in our lives. But human error occurs. If I make a mistake in my business, I get a take two. They don't. And when a mistake occurs, they need help as much as the victims as well, because they're traumatized by it.

**Dr. Lucian Leape, a leader in the field of medical errors, talks about the hierarchical structure at hospitals, the lack of teamwork, the fear of speaking up. Did you notice that?**

Most definitely, yes. After being met by the doctors and our pediatrician about what had happened, the very next people in the room were risk-management people. It turned into a lawyer situation...When this has just happened to you, as a father, as a parent, it's really inappropriate. That's the way it feels. But that's the way it was handled. It becomes about liability for them. I guess that's what they feel they have to do. But there is another way.

**Did you consider filing a lawsuit?**

Yes, we considered a suit and decided in the end not to sue the hospital. Because our whole aim—because we had a happy ending with the kids—was to turn lemons into lemonade and try to work with the hospital. We need good hospitals. I must say that Cedars [-Sinai Medical Center] has stepped up to the plate. [They] spent millions of dollars instituting bedside bar-coding, which was our big aim. They really became an example of what a hospital can do.

**This is a messy cause to take on. How should it be tackled?**

The way the aviation industry has handled human errors...[That's] a great model for health care. Aviation

figured out long ago that if they want people flying their airplanes they're going to have to make them feel safe. They find out the cause and they fix the problem. And they've made flying in an airplane safer than walking. It's a great model for the health-care industry. What it takes is more transparency. I personally believe that it could take an organization like the NTSB [National Transportation Safety Board] in health care to get to the root of it.

The thing about health-care harm is that it's already solvable; it's solvable today. It's not like finding a cure for cancer, which is months, years, or decades away. The systems are there and the technology is there. This is real health-care reform. It's going to save lives and it's going to save money.

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