Decision Rules May Be Great, But People are Crazy

The Editor-in-Chief Pick of the Month (POTM) this month provides data from Westafer et al, Provider Perspectives on the Use of Evidence-Based Risk Stratification Tools in the Evaluation of Pulmonary Embolism: A Qualitative Study. Rigorously planned and executed, this qualitative study challenges dogma but also shows the prurient truth that everyone knows but we don't talk about. This is like the Kinsey report of decision rules. Clinicians lack commitment in their relationship with decision rules. Clinicians want to be polyamorous and use or discard decision rules at their convenience. They do not want to put a ring on it: "Oh no...I'm not hitched to any ball-and-chain decision rule," they seem to say. Here is my favorite line from this paper: "Providers reported more confidence in their gestalt than risk stratification tools." Followed by this one: "Even in cases when a patient fell into a Wells' low- or intermediate-risk group, providers reported they often didn't trust a negative d-dimer, despite guideline recommendations." I don't think this is a trust issue. Rather this is an "I want an answer" issue, and I suspect, with more questioning, doctors would state they just want a CT scan because they also want a test that tells them about alternative diagnoses to PE. The most common being infiltrate suggesting infectio — a finding that is reported about twice as common on the formal read of CT pulmonary angiography from the ED as the diagnosis of PE. Other key insights include the fact that doctors use decision rules very loosely and with paradoxical logic. Consider these confessions, which the authors converted to themes, stating that providers are "...using these tools only in cases of uncertainty and, in many cases, not formally calculating a Wells' Score, rather approximating it based on gestalt," which is interesting in view of they also had the opinion that "The Wells' Score incorporates gestalt, which providers perceived as limiting the utility of the tool." When you really get down to studying clinical practice, doctors follow rules with the about the same fidelity that they obey the posted speed limit. Logic has little to do with the truths found by Westafer et al.

Somehow, this paper reminds me of the country song by Billy Currington: People are crazy. And doctors are people.

Best wishes,
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