

Title	Learning from medical litigation
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Publication date	2023-01-18
Original Citation	Forrest, C., Madden, D., O'Sullivan, M. J. and and O'Reilly, S. (2023) 'Learning from medical litigation', JCO Oncology Practice , 19:4, pp. 160-163. doi: 10.1200/OP.22.00763
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.1200/op.22.00763
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Download date	2025-03-20 14:55:27
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14432



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Learning from Medical Litigation

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In the book ‘We Need to Talk About Kevin’ the author, Lionel Shriver, recounts the fictional tale of her son whose deteriorating behaviour ultimately results in tragedy, despite many unheeded warning signs (1). In clinical medicine, we face a similar issue of a deteriorating medico-legal climate with overlooked warning signs and potential tragic consequences for many. Like the protagonist in the novel, we also need to talk about the impact and opportunity cost of our current situation.

Medical negligence claims are increasing in both quantity and subsequent cost in all continents. In the United Kingdom (UK), \$2.78bn was spent by the National Health Service (NHS) on negligence claims in 2021-2022, representing an 8.7% annual increase due to a 12.9% increase in claims and costs (2). In Ireland, the number of clinical claims increased by 46.7% and associated costs by 297% between 2010 and 2020 (3, 4). These worrying trends are being seen across Europe (5, 6). For instance, the costs of closed claims in the Netherlands has quadrupled between 2007 and 2021 (7), while in Poland, the average amount of compensation paid increased by 70% between 2014 and 2017 (8).

In contrast to the UK and many European countries, the United States (US) operates a public-private healthcare system and is governed by common law. In the US, the average amount paid per claim has been increasing year on year as has the percentage of payments over \$1m (9). The National Practitioner Data Bank reported that \$17.19bn had been paid for 36,050 medical malpractice claims between 2017 and 2021. These numbers notably include only payments made on behalf of a physician and exclude the increasing number of cases

settled on behalf of institutions, and the costs of unsuccessful claims (10). It has been estimated that the medical liability system in the US costs more than \$55 billion a year (11).

Similar trends are being seen in China where medical malpractice claims in grade-A tertiary hospitals have increased since 2008, a trend which accelerated in 2014 and was mirrored by a continuously rising average payment per claim (12).

How are these trends impacting on cancer care? A number of specialities are often seen as classically 'high-risk' for malpractice claims, obstetrics and gynaecology, surgery and emergency medicine (13, 14). Relatively low medical malpractice insurance premiums for oncologists in the US reflects the belief that they are less likely to be sued than their counterparts in other specialties (15). However, on average 9% of oncology physicians in the US faced a malpractice claim annually, which was higher than the 7.4% average rate for physicians, and ranked third after gastroenterology and pulmonary medicine, both of which are procedure based (16). Despite oncology not being classed as a stereotypically 'high-risk' field of medicine, surgical oncology disciplines have high medicolegal exposures with 19.1% of neurosurgeons, 18.9% of cardiothoracic surgeons and 15.3% general surgeons facing malpractice claims annually (16).

Breast cancer is the most common malignancy involved in malpractice claims in the US (17). Breast cancer claims have been found to arise most often from delay in diagnosis, most commonly involve radiologists followed by general surgeons and median award amounts varied from \$978,858 to \$1,800,000 (17-20). A 20 year review of US colorectal cancer cases highlighted that diagnostic error was the commonest cause for litigation. Primary care physicians were most commonly named followed by gastroenterologists and general surgeons (21). In dermatological, head and neck, oral, and oropharyngeal malignancies failure to diagnose was again the most commonly alleged reason for litigation (22, 23).

While under or delayed diagnosis is a significant medicolegal risk equally fear of litigation can lead to defensive medical practices. Surveys of pathologists have shown that concerns regarding malpractice increased their likelihood of diagnosing malignancy in equivocal lesions such as breast or pigmented skin lesions (24, 25). Defensive medicine is hypothesised to be a major cause of unnecessary diagnostic testing and subsequent overdiagnosis of thyroid cancer (26). A review of malpractice in pancreaticoduodenectomy cases found the most common cause of alleged negligence was unnecessary surgery and often also alleging misdiagnosis (27).

Malpractice litigation has a profound impact on the feasibility of cancer screening programmes. Wilson & Jungner's 1968 principles of screening remain the foundation of many global screening programmes. One of the ten principles states that 'the cost of case-finding (including a diagnosis and treatment of patients diagnosed) should be economically balanced in relation to possible expenditure on medical care as a whole' (28). Balancing this cost is difficult and the growing financial burden of malpractice claims threaten the viability of cancer screening programmes.

Mammography is one of the most common areas of medical litigation among adults and this is impacting breast cancer screening negatively due to its increasing costs and its deterrent impact on recruitment of radiologists. Survey-based studies have found that one in three radiologists are considering withdrawing from mammogram interpretation due to medical malpractice concerns (29-32). In Ireland, there have been over 360 claims filed against the National Cervical Cancer Screening Programme, CervicalCheck (33). Consequently, due to concerns that both erosion of public trust and litigation pose a threat to the viability of screening services globally, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, is conducting a review into Ireland's cancer screening programmes (34).

Aside from the financial consequences of medical litigation on cancer care, the adversarial nature of the legal process can have profound effects on both the plaintiff and medical practitioner. For the former, the process can cause upset, distress, pain, anger, disappointment and anxiety. One Irish lawyer commented that they had never seen "a plaintiff [celebrate] when they win... I don't think I've ever seen a plaintiff come out and say 'That was really worth it'" (35). For the medical professional, the emotional and psychological impact can progress from initial shock and worry to profound numbness, guilt and isolation (35).

In theory, examining the characteristics of malpractice claims can improve our understanding of the current medico-legal climate and provide a foundation from which further risk management and prevention strategies can be developed. However, in practice there are limited examples of studies' findings translating to tangible improvement of care, reduction of error and subsequent litigation. (36). Anaesthetics, arguably the leading speciality in patient safety improvement, has been the most successful. A prime example is the findings of the American Society of Anaesthetists Closed Claims Project which contributed significantly to the formulation of standards regarding endotracheal intubation, ulnar nerve injury, spinal cord injury and airway trauma (37).

In the UK in May 2021, ‘Learning from Litigation Claims: The Getting It Right First Time (GIRFT) and NHS Resolution best practice guide for clinicians and managers’ was released as part of the drive for better patient safety (38). As pointed out by John Machin, co-leader of GIRFT’s litigation workstream, ‘historically, claims learning has not had the attention it needs to maximise the potential improvements for patient care.’ (39). Since then, the GIRFT litigation workstream has improved access to claims data and provided a structured, standardised way of analysing claims which in turn has allowed practical recommendations to be applied to clinical practice (40-42).

Central to the GIRFT litigation workstream is practicality, structure and standardisation. Furthermore, there is guidance on disseminating learnings at local and national levels to facilitate data-driven improvements patient safety and care (38). Only through facilitating system-wide improvements can harm be reduced, safer care provided and spending on clinical negligence minimised (43, 44). Cancer care could benefit from integration of a similar model of reflective practice.

An initial step would be the development of a best practice guide for clinicians and managers to aid learning from cancer claims. Areas it could address include how to best access comprehensive and reliable claims-related data which may present varying levels of bureaucratic challenge depending on the type of healthcare system, confidentiality agreements in claims, and indemnity structures. It could recommend how to assess the data in a standardised manner by relevant senior clinicians and with the assistance of experienced medical lawyers so actionable recommendations can be made. It might comment on how to establish a workforce team to implement and monitor the progress of these recommendations. Finally, it may suggest how best to disseminate and discuss findings and proposed changes such as integration with existing fora such as surgical morbidity and mortality meetings or department-wide journal clubs. Integration of such reflective learning should also be integrated into oncology conferences (44).

Cancer care involves a continuous cycle of learning from the inputs of clinical trials and evidence-based medicine. This cycle of information integration doesn’t routinely include learnings from medical litigation but each claim represents a modifiable, teachable moment. Lest we fail to heed the warning signs to talk about the current challenges medicolegal poses for clinical practice, our actions will come too late much like with Kevin.

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