



3 STRATEGIES TO ENSURE TIMELY TEST RESULTS COMMUNICATION

Communication failure can cause patient injury due to treatment delay, delayed diagnosis or misdiagnosis, or lack of follow-up, and is a frequent allegation in malpractice lawsuits. Especially in primary care practices, expedited follow-up on critical or significantly abnormal test results is a major aspect of liability risk management and patient safety. In this special report, NORCAL Risk Management experts offer strategies for reducing communication failures to increase patient safety and reduce professional liability.

COMMUNICATION FAILURES A MAJOR ISSUE IN MEDICAL LIABILITY CLAIMS¹

Communications issues — *communication problems between healthcare providers and failure to follow-up on tests/consults* — were among the most expensive (highest indemnity) and most frequent (number of claims) associated issues in medical liability claims.

MOST FREQUENT ASSOCIATED ISSUES

1. Problems with history, exam, or workup
2. X-ray error
3. Comorbid issues
4. **Communication problems between healthcare providers**
5. Consent issues
6. Problems with records
7. Involves surgical/medical device
8. **Failure to follow-up on tests/consults**
9. Vicarious liability
10. Unnecessary treatment



MOST EXPENSIVE ASSOCIATED ISSUES

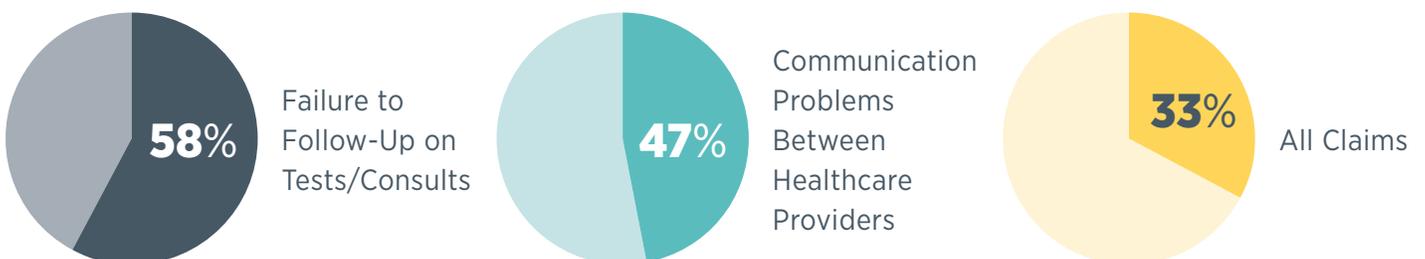
1. Problems with History, Exam, or Workup
2. Problems with Records
3. **Communication problems between healthcare providers**
4. Comorbid Issues
5. X-ray Error
6. **Failure to follow-up on tests/consults**
7. Consent Issues
8. Lack of Adequate Facilities, Equipment, or Staff
9. Unnecessary Treatment
10. Fraud



TOP 5 SPECIALTIES WITH HIGHEST INDEMNITY PAYMENTS

<p>FAILURE TO FOLLOW-UP ON TESTS/CONSULTS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Internal Medicine 2. OB/GYN 3. Family Medicine 4. Pediatrics 5. Cardiology 	<p>COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS BETWEEN HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. OB/GYN 2. Internal Medicine 3. Radiology 4. Family Medicine 5. General Surgery
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PERCENTAGE OF CLAIMS WITH INDEMNITY PAYMENTS



RISK MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS: DO YOU HAVE AN EFFECTIVE “TICKLER SYSTEM”?

Evidence of absent or poor follow-up systems can be used to support negligence allegations and to shed a generally negative light on the defendant physician during malpractice litigation. There are a variety of ways to ensure that patients receive test results in a timely fashion. Consider the following recommendations:²

1 TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF EXISTING CAPABILITIES

- » Utilize the tracking and follow-up capabilities in an electronic medical record system to their full capabilities.
- » Document follow-up communication in the medical record.
- » For manual tracking, consider implementing the following:
 - Place copies of all ordered tests in a designated file.
 - Monitor this file regularly to ensure that all ordered tests have been completed and that you have received the results.

2 ESTABLISH AND COMMUNICATE APPROPRIATE EXPECTATIONS

- » Ask the laboratory/radiologist/pathologist how long it will take to provide results and use this time frame when developing a follow-up system.
- » When ordering tests, tell patients approximately how long it will take to obtain results.
- » Advise patients to call by an appropriate date if they have not been advised of results.
 - Requesting the patient’s involvement in follow-up should enhance, not replace, an office “tickler system.”

3 ACTIVELY MONITOR AND TRACK ORDERED TESTS

- » Utilize a tracking mechanism to compare all tests ordered with the corresponding results.
- » Contact patients, consultants, and the facility conducting the test (as appropriate) to determine the reason for delayed tests or missing test results.
- » Audit communication processes to ensure compliance with reporting procedures and the timeliness of abnormal test result follow-up.



For an in-depth discussion of this subject — including a wealth of recommendations from NORCAL Risk Management experts — see [“Healthcare Communication: Case Studies and Best Practices for Communicating Critical Findings”](#) in the the NORCAL Knowledge Library.

This report is presented as a courtesy by NORCAL Insurance Company. Our Risk Management Specialists are always ready to help policyholders with risk issues and to support practice changes that lower risk and improve patient safety.

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