

New study suggests every patient will experience a missed or late diagnosis

The frequency of diagnostic errors is difficult to track, but new research shows that these errors are very common and may affect virtually every patient.

New research from the Institute of Medicine indicates diagnostic errors or delays occur so frequently that every patient will experience one at some point. The precise rate at which serious diagnostic errors occur in Phoenix and other parts of Arizona is difficult to identify, given the nature of these mistakes. However, according to U.S. News, the available data shows that misdiagnosis and [failure to diagnose](#) are fairly common causes of death and factors in successful medical malpractice claims.

Prevalence of diagnostic errors

The IOM study concluded that information about the rate, cost and other impacts of diagnostic errors is limited. This lack of data may occur in part because many errors go uncaught for long periods of time and are never reported back to the responsible medical professional. Still, the report found that these errors adversely affect countless patients. The following statistics help show how common and harmful these errors are:

- As many as 17 percent of adverse events that occur in hospitals involve diagnostic errors.
- Medical malpractice claim data reveals that, compared to other medical errors, diagnostic mistakes are twice as likely to prove fatal.
- Up to 10 percent of patient deaths may occur due to delayed or incorrect diagnoses, according to postmortem studies.

According to CBS News, past research suggests that as many as one in 20 adults in the U.S. who seek care in outpatient settings experience [missed or incorrect diagnoses](#). This figure translates to about 12 million people per year who are exposed to potential injuries, complications or even death as a result of flawed diagnoses.

Factors in diagnostic mistakes

There are various reasons that diagnostic errors can occur. One study found that many

mistakes happened when doctors failed to order appropriate medical tests or misinterpreted test results. Communication issues between doctors and patients were another common factor in misdiagnoses.

Similarly, according to U.S. News, the recent study found that limited accessibility of medical information might raise the risk of mistakes. When patients receive care from multiple doctors who aren't necessarily working collaboratively, errors may be more likely to occur. This is also the case when doctors have trouble accessing medical records or other patient information that is stored electronically.

The IOM study concluded that better tracking of diagnostic errors is a prerequisite to the reduction of these errors. According to the study authors, medical professionals must establish better criteria for classifying diagnostic errors and find a way to track progress in reducing them. Sadly, until such changes are implemented, these errors may continue to occur at a high rate.

Malpractice claims for misdiagnoses

Missed or delayed diagnoses that cause injuries or other harm to patients may constitute medical malpractice. In Arizona, people who suffer harm due to malpractice may be able to obtain damages for past and future wage loss, medical expenses and pain and suffering. However, these patients must first show that the medical professional responsible for the error did not exhibit the skill or care that a competent medical professional would display in the same situation.

Unfortunately, meeting this standard can be difficult in cases that involve diagnostic errors. The diagnostic process is often subjective, and proving that an error should have been avoided can be challenging. Therefore, anyone who has suffered harm due to diagnostic errors should consider consulting with an attorney for advice on seeking recourse.

Sources:

U.S. News & World Report, "'Countless' Patients Harmed By Wrong or Delayed Diagnoses," Steve Sternberg, September 22, 2015.

CBS News, "12 million Americans misdiagnosed each year," Jessica Firger, April 17, 2014.

Arizona State Senate Issue Paper, Medical Malpractice, June 22, 2010.