

# Radiologists overestimate their overall risk of malpractice lawsuits in breast imaging

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Radiologists who work in breast imaging tend to overestimate their actual risk of medical malpractice lawsuits, according to a study performed at the University of Washington School of Public Health and Community Medicine in Seattle, WA.

The study included two separate surveys, one in 2002 and one in 2006 that asked radiologists in diverse regions of the US two questions: Have you ever had a previous malpractice claim related to mammography? And what do you think is your future probability of being sued in the next five years? Results showed that "the radiologist's median estimate for the likelihood of being sued was four times higher than their actual risk," said Joann G. Elmore, MD, lead author of the study. In 2002, a radiologist's perceived risk of being sued in the next five years was 41% and in 2006 was 35%. The actual percentage of radiologists who reported malpractice claims five years prior to 2002 was 8% and the actual percentage of radiologists who reported malpractice claims five years prior to the 2006 survey was 10%. "Their perception of risk is much higher than the reported reality," she said.

"Failure to detect breast cancer has been the leading cause of medical malpractice lawsuits. Malpractice litigation has a direct effect on healthcare delivery in the US and ultimately may influence the way we practice medicine," said Dr. Elmore. "Under such circumstances, doctors are turning to defensive medicine, where we order more tests to make certain we aren't missing something," she said.

Workforce shortages in breast imaging may also be considered the result of a physician's perceived risk of malpractice lawsuits. "We have seen fewer residents interested in going into breast imaging, partially because of their perceived risk of being sued," said Dr. Elmore.

This study appears in the February issue of the *American Journal of Roentgenology*.

Source: American Roentgen Ray Society

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