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Primary care physicians hardest hit by heart attack malpractice suits

Primary care physicians, such as family practitioners and general internists, have the highest number of heart-attack-diagnosis-related malpractice claims and the highest average lawsuit payments of any physician specialty.

According to the study by the Physician Insurers Association, which evaluated paid malpractice claims related to heart attacks since January 1985, family physicians faced the highest number of claims (160 of 423 defendants). Internal medicine physicians, who faced the second highest number of claims, had to pay the highest average indemnity payment of any specialty group (\$252,100).

What are these doctors doing wrong to miss heart attacks?

In cases involving diagnostic errors, the physician ordered an EKG in 59% of cases. No diagnostic study of any kind was performed in 28% of cases. In more than half the cases in which an EKG was performed but the physician did not make the correct diagnosis, the EKG was either misinterpreted or the results were not conveyed to the physician quickly enough.

The study noted that 277 of the 304 providers sued for diagnostic errors did not correctly diagnose the heart attack at all, and of these, 220 did not even refer the patient to another provider.

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The most common initial diagnosis made in error by providers was that of a gastrointestinal complaint, followed by musculoskeletal pain; angina; a respiratory ailment, such as bronchitis, pneumonia or asthma; and anxiety. The study alleges that 77% of patients died as a result of the diagnostic and treatment errors.

In addition, of the 154 claims for treatment – as opposed to diagnostic – errors, 109 involved allegations related to both treatment and diagnostic issues, with patients in 22 of the 154 cases reporting they received no treatment at all.

Twenty-seven member insurance companies participated in the study, reporting a total of 349 paid cases related to heart attack.

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