



Georgia Composite Medical Board

“No Lab Left Behind”: Increasing Awareness about Liability for Lab Results

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A significant component of office-based and even hospital-based medical practice involves laboratory assessments to complement the diagnosis and management of medical conditions. **It is ultimately the responsibility of the physician to ensure that lab results that have been ordered are reviewed in a timely fashion, that abnormal findings are communicated to the patient and that an action plan is documented in the medical record when necessary.** This becomes an increasing challenge due to time constraints, patient overload, patient care that involves multiple providers, call schedules, imperfect interface between the electronic health record and external laboratory processing centers and ability to notify the patient. While never intentional, delayed awareness of abnormal labs may have significant impact on patient health outcomes and affect the ability to intervene in a timely fashion. It may result in short-term impacts that may be easily addressed or may lead to long-term sequelae for the patient. **All patient practice models are encouraged to take the initiative to work proactively with providers, administrative and laboratory staff on developing a strategic plan to ensure that a safety net exists to ensure that “no lab is left behind.”**

Safety net suggestions:

1. Develop a **reliable tracking system**: pathology reports may take longer or may not be processed immediately and need to be followed; a log-book may help.
2. Develop a **notification system**: require a conversation with a provider if there is a critical result – not acceptable to leave a voicemail or send fax without live confirmation.
3. Develop a **documentation system**: your system should be efficient and effective and not a burden or barrier to provide good care. Your documentation voice should be customized to your paper or electronic charts.
4. Develop a **vacation plan**: What happens if the provider that ordered the lab is not on call or that provider is on vacation? There should be a plan B or plan C to avoid change reliability of good care.
5. Develop a **system for patient notification** - the “who” and “when” of how your patients are informed of results needs to be tailored to your practice and may involve a pre-determined priority designation for specific results.
6. Require **frequent verification of patient/emergency contact information** - patient contact information is the fifth vital sign. It is essential to be able to reach your patient.

7. Utilize **multiple modes of contact** – regularly engage patients via phone, text, email, or letter (range of features often offered through electronic medical records), to help communicate important lab results.
8. Allow patients to review results on a **secure portal** – promote patient engagement with access to results on a patient portal and allow for information exchange if they have questions.
9. Request dual notification (verbal and written) of **updates in the format of labs reports and reference ranges** – this is a critical component for providers who are reviewing labs and looking for abnormal results.
10. Develop the **habit of reading the entire report** - not everything abnormal may be highlighted. Furthermore, if there is a panel that has been ordered, be sure that all components have been reported.

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