



Posted On: **November 10, 2010** by [Patrick A. Malone](#)

Fatigue Wears at Doctors' Work Performance Too

The headline is not exactly shocking, so the real news may be why the issue of how long work days can cause doctors to make errors is so rarely studied.

For nurses and residents (doctors in training), plenty of studies have found that when work days stretch beyond twelve hours, more mistakes are made, and patients become vulnerable to malpractice and even smaller errors.

But a new [study of radiologists](#) is one of the first to examine the effect of long work days on the performance of attending level physicians. The researchers gave a set of bone X-rays to radiologists at the beginning of their work day, and again at the end.

Patrick A. Malone
Patrick Malone & Associates, P.C.
1331 H Street N.W.
Suite 902
Washington, DC 20005

pmalone@patrickmalonelaw.com
www.patrickmalonelaw.com
202-742-1500
202-742-1515 (fax)

Then they measured their accuracy at finding fractures. By the end of the day, the radiologists were making around one in twenty more errors -- both missing fractures and seeing ones that weren't there -- than at the start of the day. It's a small but significant difference.

The study in the radiology journal concluded:

"After a day of clinical reading, radiologists have reduced ability to focus, increased symptoms of fatigue and oculomotor strain, and reduced ability to detect fractures."

Dr. Bob Wachter, a UCSF patient safety guru, has a thoughtful piece on this in his own blog, which he titled: Tugging on Superman's Cape. [Read it here.](#)

Dr. Wachter riffed off a story he heard about legendary heart surgeon Michael DeBakey performing sixteen open heart surgeries in a single day, even in his eighties. While the Baylor staffer who told Wachter this story was awestruck at DeBakey's stamina, Wachter wondered what it would be like to be patient No. 16.

For the rest of us, there's a lesson when facing elective surgery. Surgeons love to stack up patients back to back and operate from the early morning to late in the day. If we have any choice, we should opt for a place early in the queue. Why tempt the gods of fatigue?

Article first published as [Fatigue Wears at Doctors' Work Performance Too](#) on Technorati.

People interested in learning more about our firm's legal services, including [medical malpractice in Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia](#), may ask questions or send us

Patrick A. Malone
Patrick Malone & Associates, P.C.
1331 H Street N.W.
Suite 902
Washington, DC 20005

pmalone@patrickmalonelaw.com
www.patrickmalonelaw.com
202-742-1500
202-742-1515 (fax)

information about a particular case by phone or email. There is no charge for contacting us regarding your inquiry. A [malpractice attorney](#) will respond within 24 hours.

All contents copyrighted 2010 [Patrick Malone & Associates](#) except where copyright held by others. Reproduction in any form prohibited except where expressly granted.

Patrick A. Malone
Patrick Malone & Associates, P.C.
1331 H Street N.W.
Suite 902
Washington, DC 20005

pmalone@patrickmalonelaw.com
www.patrickmalonelaw.com
202-742-1500
202-742-1515 (fax)

Copyright 2010 Patrick Malone