



Posted On: **December 29, 2010** by [Patrick A. Malone](#)

Radiation Therapy Malpractice: A Deadly Combination of Errors

Why do patients who need focused, precise doses of radiation get walloped with huge overdoses that cause serious and even fatal injuries? A deadly combination of non-user-friendly radiation equipment, incompatible software when machines from different manufacturers are cobbled together, user error by the technicians administering the radiation, and lax regulation by federal authorities: All these are major issues in the ongoing expose by the New York Times of malpractice issues in radiation therapy.

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In the [latest installment](#), the team led by reporter Walt Bogdanich focuses on linear accelerators, machines that originally were intended to give broad-beam radiation doses to large swaths of the body, but now are increasingly modified to deliver what are supposed to be precise, focused radiation beams. The therapy is called stereotactic radiosurgery, and it allows hospitals who lack the more expensive competitor device, gamma knife surgery, to compete for radiation therapy business when the patient needs a very focused, intense dose to sensitive tissue -- such as a nerve deep in the brain.

But without proper setup, and without an easy way to see when the machine's beam has not been focused properly, tragedies can happen, as the reporters document.

One issue that this blog has focused on in other contexts with medical devices: The lack of a mandatory public registry to gather prompt reports of injuries and errors so that problems can be nipped in the bud rather than injuring patient after patient. The society of radiation oncologists is now asking for the creation of such a registry by the Food and Drug Administration. But the FDA lacks legal authority to force anyone other than a manufacturer to make a report.

How can patients protect themselves? Make sure the radiation unit you go to is well established, not brand new, and that the technicians are certified in the field of medical physics. More tips can be found in our previous [article on the subject here](#).

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