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Phone: ..... 1-(800)-355-1329  
Phone: ..... 1-(800)-666-7045  
Fax: ..... 1-(610)-941-9730

E-mail: ..... info@techmedexperts.com

## BACK PAIN

Back Pain  
*Neurosurgeon from North Carolina*

Low back pain is one of the most common symptoms a physician encounters in the general patient population. Low back pain occurs at least once in 85% of the population aged 50 or less and is the fourth most common complaint in outpatient medicine. The medical costs associated with low back pain are surpassed only by those associated with cancer and heart disease. As a result of its ubiquity, the diagnosis and treatment of low back pain is frequently associated with litigation. In general, such litigation involves the failure to diagnose a serious condition causing low back pain, negligence in the performance of lumbar surgery, or the failure to diagnose and treat a post-operative complication of lumbar surgery.

The failure to diagnose and treat a serious condition causing low back pain is a common reason for litigation. A prime example is cauda equine syndrome.

Cauda equine syndrome is characterized by bilateral lower extremity numbness and weakness, perineal or perianal numbness, and bladder or bowel dysfunction. Acute cauda equine syndrome is generally considered a medical emergency, can be caused by any disease process, commonly a ruptured disk, tumor or infection, placing pressure upon the cauda equine, and must be diagnosed and treated in a timely manner. Failure to do so would constitute treatment that fell below the applicable standard of care.

Other disease entities that commonly cause back pain and that are frequently overlooked include infections of the spine, tumors of the spine, and fractures of the spine.

Generally, in patients who present with back pain associated with neurological signs or symptoms or who have an unusual clinical presentation, timely radiographic studies are indicated, and failure to order such studies constitute medical care that falls below the applicable standard of care.