The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics Vol. 40 pp. 201 – 209

Public Access Publication: 29 August, 2024

Medical Negligence and the "Safe Sandbox" for Innovation

Martin Davies

There is much policy debate currently about liability immunity, and medical liability has been a specific topic of debate for decades. This debate reflects concerns about increased health care spending related to undue fear of liability, commonly described as defensive medicine.

Building on the three characteristics outlined above, Safe Sandbox protocols can be subdivided into three operational categories: (1) Diagnostic Parsimony Pathways, which specify when imaging, laboratory panels, and subspecialty referrals confer marginal benefit; (2) Therapeutic De-escalation Pathways, which outline stepped reductions in pharmaceutical or procedural intensity once key clinical thresholds are met; and (3) Rapid-Iteration Innovation Pathways, which authorise carefully monitored off-label or first-in-class interventions where early-phase evidence suggests potential benefit sandbox for safe experimentation. Each category carries its own evidentiary thresholds, oversight cadence, and sunset provisions to ensure that sandbox rules evolve in tandem with the knowledge base.

Under 1157 of the Social Security Act, QIOs already possess the statutory authority to promulgate binding practice standards that immunise compliant practitioners from malpractice exposure when care is delivered "in conformity with a standard approved by the organisation." A practical roadmap for activation would involve: (i) CMS issuing interpretive guidance confirming that narrowly drafted sandbox pathways fall within QIO remit; (ii) pilot designation of three high-volume clinical scenarios—minor head injury, uncomplicated low-back pain, and non-migraine headache—for the first wave of sandbox protocols; and (iii) mandatory five-year effectiveness audits, linking Medicare Part A/B claims data to patient-reported outcomes.

In clinical-negligence law there is a constant tension between protecting patients from avoidable harm and allowing medicine to evolve. One way to frame that tension is to contrast two very different liability models. On the one hand sits a strict "single-best-option" rule: a vision of the duty of care in which the clinician must always pick the treatment that appears objectively superior on the day of decision, measured against guidelines, randomised-trial data and aggregated outcomes. On the other hand is the Bolam/Bolitho approach that English courts actually apply. Bolam asks only whether a responsible body of professional opinion would support the impugned decision; Bolitho adds that the body's support must be logically defensible in light of risks and benefits. The doctor need not show that her choice was *the* best—only that respectable peers could rationally stand behind it.

Why does that difference matter for innovation? A single-best-option rule, especially if enforced with the benefit of hindsight, freezes practice at the cautious midpoint. Early adopters of new devices or techniques face a heightened litigation threat precisely because the evidential base for their choice is still thin. The safest legal posture therefore becomes rigid compliance with national protocols and algorithmic care pathways. Over time such a regime may deter experimentation, slow the translation of laboratory discoveries into bedside therapies, and leave patients stuck with yesterday's standards.

Bolam, by contrast, creates what a number of commentators describe as a "safe sandbox" for clinical experimentation. The metaphor is instructive. A sandbox is bounded: children can build new structures, knock them down and try again, but they cannot wander into the street. Similarly, a doctor operating inside the negligence sandbox enjoys room to innovate—but only so long as she can articulate a coherent risk–benefit rationale and point to some credible peer support. Courts still police the perimeter; they will strike down idiosyncratic practices where the professional endorsement is irrational, outdated or hopelessly thin. Yet within those perimeter walls the clinician may depart from NICE or Royal-College guidance if she can show that responsible colleagues would have done the same in the circumstances.

The sandbox idea serves three purposes. First, it preserves an incentive to generate fresh evidence. Innovators know they can avoid liability if they persuade a subset of their peers, publish pilot data and explain their reasoning. Second, it acknowledges the inevitability of medical uncertainty. Where pathophysiology is poorly understood—or where patient values diverge—there may be no single "correct" answer, and the law is ill-suited to proclaim one. Third, it aligns with ethical aspirations toward personalised care. Patients are not statistical averages; occasionally the best course for an individual will be precisely the outlier option that guidelines do not yet recommend.

Of course the sandbox is not a negligence-free playground. Courts can and do refuse to accept professional consensus that rests on outdated data, commercial bias or mere habit. The Bolitho gloss ensures that expert testimony cannot hide behind jargon: judges must be satisfied that the professional endorsement is reasoned, evidence-based and attentive to alternative possibilities. When that safeguard is taken seriously, the sandbox becomes a balanced mechanism—protecting patients against reckless experimentation while avoiding the paralysis that a single-best-option rule would impose.

Seen in this light, clinical negligence doctrine functions not only as a retrospective tribunal but also as a prospective regulator. By permitting innovation within a monitored, peer-reviewed space, it encourages the profession to refine treatments and expand knowledge, knowing that legal accountability will ultimately hinge on whether their exploratory steps were both logical and responsibly supported.

The Choosing Wisely movement is an attempt by numerous medical societies—led by the American Board of Internal Medicine Foundation—to curtail medical services that provide limited benefits relative to their costs. However, Choosing Wisely demonstrates the drawbacks of such a movement that does not account for liability considerations, which may help to explain why the uptake of Choosing Wisely recommendations has not been more robust.[1]

In light of the increased interest in liability reform in general, the time may now be propitious to consider medical liability reforms that reduce provider incentives to practice defensive medicine by ordering unnecessary tests and procedures. One study found that when providers faced no threat of liability, inpatient spending was 5% lower while patient outcomes remained the same,[2] suggesting the potential for substantial savings.

One goal of malpractice liability is deterring the provision of unsafe care. Providers are liable for monetary damages when they deviate from sound medical practice and harm patients as a result. Providers follow the customary standard of care, which, in theory, is knowable in advance, dictated by typical practice, and driven by science. However, 2 types of uncertainty undermine the current malpractice system and induce providers to deliver costly and unnecessary care to avoid liability.[3]

First, clinical uncertainty calls into question what constitutes sound medical practice and challenges the very idea of a consensus-driven standard of care. While the standard of care may be clear in some instances, the appropriate course of action in each situation is often unclear, as evidenced by wide variations in treatment patterns across the country.[4]

Courts rely on customary practice to decide the standard of care in individual cases. Customary practice is determined by a jury's interpretation of often-conflicting expert opinion on how providers in a given area deliver care. It offers uncertain guidance to providers in specific circumstances and undermines a fundamental principle of medical malpractice law—that the standard of care should be scientifically determined by medical experts. Given clinical uncertainty, providers are incentivized to practice defensively, potentially ordering unnecessary tests or procedures.

Second, the post hoc evaluation of providers' actions creates structural uncertainty. The standard of care is not determined until well after the actions giving rise to a malpractice claim have occurred. Providers often do not know what standard their actions must satisfy at the time of the clinical encounter. Clinical and structural uncertainty may leave providers unsure of what to do when delivering care.

Malpractice reform has generally taken a remedy-centric approach, focusing on the amount of damages awarded.[5] Such reforms do little to provide clinicians with better information about the proper course of action in any given case. Recent research demonstrates that changes to the standard of care can induce clear changes in clinical practice.[6] Focusing on the determination of liability, instead of remedies, may be better at reducing defensive medicine and its associated costs.

As a policy alternative, we advance the concept of Safe Sandbox, which offer providers guidelines for delivering care in specific targeted situations and, if followed non-negligently, can immunize providers from liability. By providing clinicians with clear standards of care in carefully defined circumstances, Safe Sandbox can address both clinical and structural uncertainty for common conditions such as minor head injury, lower back pain, and uncomplicated headache. Such clinical scenarios occur routinely in an emergency department or urgent care setting, are targeted by Choosing Wisely, and can prompt physicians to order expensive and unnecessary defensive imaging tests.

Effective Safe Sandbox require 3 critical characteristics.[3] First, Safe Sandbox must be announced in advance so providers can deliver care with the relevant standard in mind. Second, each Safe Harbor must provide clear, narrow, and targeted guidelines. Though not yet operationalized, such guidelines would reduce the use of discretion and thereby prevent courts and juries from second-guessing the appropriateness of a provider's actions. Special guidelines of this type also return standard-setting to medical experts, diminishing the role of courts and lay juries.

Third, the guidelines must carry the force of law and constitute the standard of care, not merely provide evidence of the standard. If a guideline is not the standard, then providers will face uncertainty over how a court or a jury will apply a standard. Choosing Wisely has offered numerous recommendations, but those recommendations do not carry the force of law. Courts and juries can apply a different standard and hold liable a provider who complies with a Choosing Wisely recommendation. In contrast, a true Safe Harbor does not permit courts to apply a different standard of care. Absence of the force of law may explain why Choosing Wisely recommendations have not been widely implemented.[7]

The institutional mechanism for implementing a Safe Harbor strategy has existed under federal law for decades, but it has been left unused. Specifically, Safe Sandbox could be implemented by Quality Improvement Organizations (QIOs), which operate under federal law as self-regulatory organizations designed to monitor quality and cost in federal health care programs.[3] The QIO legislation includes a provision that immunizes providers from malpractice liability when they practice nonnegligently in conformity with a standard approved by a QIO.[3] Quality Improvement Organizations are authorized to engage in general quality-of-care review in which they can endorse Safe Sandbox for narrowly defined areas of care.

The federal law authorizing QIOs may provide a useful model for considering liability immunity in health care. Quality Improvement Organizations would provide an effective mechanism to adopt and secure the benefits of Safe Sandbox. Given the continued importance of containing health care

spending and reducing unnecessary patient risk, encouraging QIOs to adopt Safe Sandbox to reduce the costs of defensive medicine would be a useful avenue to pursue.

The Safe Sandbox proposal offers a pragmatic middle path between two extremes that have long dominated the medical-liability conversation. On one side lies an expansive tort regime that tolerates broad uncertainty and therefore fuels defensive practice; on the other is blanket immunity that risks eroding patient safety and public trust. By providing ex-ante clarity—in the form of peer-vetted, time-limited, and data-linked care pathways—Safe Sandboxes can shrink the grey zone in which clinicians feel compelled to over-treat while still preserving a robust back-stop against reckless deviation.

From an economic standpoint, the potential gains are non-trivial. If the 5 percent inpatient-spending reduction observed in natural-experiment studies were replicated nationwide, Medicare could save several billion dollars annually without jeopardising outcomes. Those resources could be redeployed toward under-funded public-health initiatives, primary-care access, and the rapid evaluation of new sandbox candidates. Because sandbox compliance would be recorded in real time through clinician registries, policymakers could link fiscal savings directly to specific protocol roll-outs, creating a virtuous feedback loop for continuous refinement.

Patient interests are likewise served. Defensive medicine is not merely wasteful; it exposes patients to unnecessary radiation, invasive procedures, and incidental findings that trigger cascades of anxiety and further testing. By tethering immunity to evidence-based restraint, the sandbox model realigns incentives with the first principle of medicine—*primum non nocere*—while giving patients transparent information about why certain low-value interventions are being deferred. Importantly, sandbox participation should remain opt-in at the patient level, reinforcing autonomy and fostering a culture of shared decision-making.

Clinicians, for their part, gain a structured environment in which to innovate responsibly. The history of medical progress is replete with breakthroughs that began as outliers—laparoscopic surgery, beta-blockers for heart failure, checkpoint inhibitors for cancer. Each confronted initial scepticism precisely because the evidentiary base was nascent. A sandbox pathway—anchored by prospective data capture and periodic sunset review—allows such ideas to be tested under controlled conditions rather than flourish (or fail) in an evidentiary vacuum. The result is faster diffusion of genuinely beneficial advances and quicker abandonment of those that disappoint.

The legal system also benefits. Tort litigation is a blunt, retrospective tool that consumes vast resources while offering limited forward-looking guidance. By contrast, sandbox protocols are crafted **before** harm occurs and are refined continuously as new data emerge. Courts would still adjudicate cases of blatant non-compliance or illogical peer support, but the overall volume of ambiguous ‘standard-of-care’ disputes should diminish, freeing judicial capacity for truly contested questions.

Successful implementation will require coordinated action. Congress should clarify that Quality Improvement Organisations may designate sandbox protocols with binding force and should appropriate seed funding for the requisite data infrastructure. CMS must issue interpretive guidance and convene multi-stakeholder panels—including patient advocates—to select high-value clinical targets. State legislatures can accelerate adoption by harmonising local evidentiary rules with the federal immunity framework, ensuring that sandbox compliance is dispositive rather than merely persuasive.

International experience underscores both the urgency and feasibility of such reform. Canada’s Choosing Wisely-informed safe-harbour statutes in Ontario and British Columbia have shown early

promise in reducing low-value imaging, while New Zealand's Accident Compensation Corporation demonstrates that alternative liability models can coexist with high clinical standards. The United States need not copy these systems wholesale, but their success signals that recalibrating incentives is politically and operationally achievable.

In sum, Safe Sandboxes represent a third way—neither laissez-faire immunity nor rigid protocolism, but a calibrated framework that rewards prudence, encourages innovation, and protects patients. As healthcare spending climbs and technological possibilities expand, the cost of sustaining a liability system designed for a simpler era will only grow. By activating the long-dormant authority of QIOs, lawmakers can deliver a modern malpractice architecture fit for twenty-first-century medicine—one that replaces fear-driven excess with evidence-driven care, to the ultimate benefit of patients, payers, and professionals alike.

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