

March 11, 2025

Dear Valued Patients,

We regret to inform you that Dr. Lisa Balduf, our esteemed general surgeon, will be leaving Health Specialties of New Mexico/New Mexico Oncology Hematology Consultants, Ltd. effective April 18, 2025. Dr. Balduf has been a dedicated member of our team, providing high-quality surgical care to our community. We deeply appreciate her contributions and know that many of you have built strong relationships with her over the years.

Dr. Balduf's decision to leave our practice has been influenced by the evolving medical malpractice climate in New Mexico. Unfortunately, the increasing challenges faced by healthcare providers in this area have made it difficult for her to continue practicing here. This is a broader issue affecting many physicians across the state, and we share in the concern for how these factors impact access to care for our patients.

We understand that transitions like these can be concerning, and we are committed to ensuring continuity of care for all patients. We have not been able to recruit another general surgeon, so we are developing surgical partnerships to provide these services. If you need assistance finding a new general surgeon, we have compiled a list of trusted providers in the area. Please feel free to contact our office (505) 726-5824 to receive this information. If you would like to obtain your medical records, please call our medical records department (505) 313-8235.

We sincerely appreciate your trust and support, and we remain dedicated to providing you with excellent healthcare. If you have any questions or need assistance, please do not hesitate to contact our office at (505) 842-8171.

Thank you for being a valued part of our patient community.

Sincerely,

Dr. Barbara McAneny
CEO

Messina Gurrola
Director of Health Specialties

BY TODD GOLDBLUM

Local Column

Why I am retiring early from medicine

After more than 30 years as a pediatric eye surgeon in New Mexico, I've decided to retire early. This isn't because I've lost passion for caring for children — it's because continuing to practice here has become nearly impossible.

Pediatric eye surgery is one of medicine's most challenging and rewarding fields. We treat children with cataracts, eye cancers, crossed eyes, lazy eyes and severe visual impairment. Many are infants or children with

special needs who cannot describe what they see. Our practice is the only one in New Mexico with doctors trained to diagnose and treat complex eye and vision problems in children. We care for some of the most medically fragile and visually impaired children in the state.

New Mexico already faces a severe shortage of pediatric specialists. Families often drive hundreds of miles, even to

Colorado, to get timely care. When one specialist retires or leaves, the system strains further. Unfortunately, the state's legal climate is driving physicians out.

New Mexico is among the most litigious states in the nation. Roughly 95% of malpractice suits here include punitive damages, which are designed not to compensate patients but to punish doctors — and they are not covered by malpractice insurance. One lawsuit, even if unfounded, can financially devastate a physician.

Malpractice premiums have skyrocketed. The income I generate from surgery barely covers the insurance cost. In fact, doctors in New Mexico now pay nearly double the malpractice premiums of physicians in neighboring states. In effect, I'm working to pay for protection from lawsuits rather than caring for patients.

Last year, a modest malpractice reform bill was introduced in the Legislature to bring New Mexico in line with neighboring states that balance patient rights with fairness for doctors. It was tabled after lobbying by trial attorneys who claimed the current system is needed to

curb harm done by large hospitals and corporations.

They are wrong. This system isn't punishing "big hospitals." It's driving out independent doctors like me — the small, community-based physicians who provide the most personal care. When those doctors leave or retire early, patients lose.

I didn't enter medicine to become wealthy or avoid risk. I entered to help children see — to give them a chance at a brighter, more independent future. But when the cost of doing that work becomes unsustainable, and when the constant threat of litigation overshadows the joy of patient care, it's time to step away.

Without meaningful reform, more physicians will leave or stop offering the high-risk services children depend on. Families will increasingly be forced to travel out of state. The children of New Mexico deserve better.

New Mexicans can help make a difference by urging their state representatives and senators to support meaningful malpractice reform, as endorsed by the New

Mexico Medical Society. The 2026 elections will also be crucial. New Mexicans need to elect representatives, a governor and an attorney general who are not swayed by the trial lawyers' association but who will stand behind meaningful reform to protect access to care in our state. This issue isn't about politics — it's about preserving a health care system that serves every family in New Mexico.

For me, retirement is bitter-sweet. I take pride in the thousands of young lives I've helped over the past three decades. But I leave with hope that my story — and others like it — will finally prompt lawmakers and citizens to act.

Because if nothing changes, the question won't be why I retired early — it will be who will be left to take care of New Mexico's children when I'm gone?

Todd Goldblum, MD, pediatric ophthalmology and strabismus, with Family and Children's Eye Center of New Mexico. He is also an assistant professor, Department of Ophthalmology & Visual Sciences at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine.



Todd Goldblum

BY DEBBIE VIGIL

Local Column

My patients lost their doctor due to NM's malpractice law

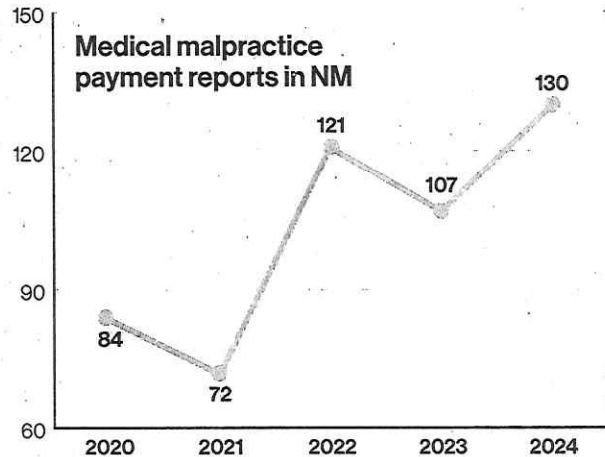
I was disappointed to read former-Speaker Brian Egolf's recent opinion piece ("Putting patients, providers first: A plan for NM health care" in the Aug. 17 Sunday Journal), which misrepresented his 2021 medical malpractice legislation and attempted to obscure the very real reasons why doctors like me can no longer practice in New Mexico.

In 1989, I opened my OB-GYN practice in Santa Fe because I wanted to serve my local community. Managing the business side of my practice in New Mexico was never easy: The expenses were high due to gross receipts taxes on medical services (which are only charged in one other state, Hawaii), as well as low reimbursement rates for treating patients insured by Medicaid. But it was doable, and the challenges were worthwhile to care for my patients.

Everything changed after the medical malpractice overhaul in 2021, which was driven by trial lawyers. Far from being a fair process, doctors were left out of the conversation about this legislation. There were and are no doctors serving in the state House, and only one in the Senate. Meanwhile, Egolf and the lead sponsor of the bill, former Rep. Daymon Ely, are both trial lawyers who make money suing doctors.

The result of the 2021 law was an unbalanced medical malpractice system that prioritizes the profits of lawyers over the interests of patients and providers. Egolf calls the overhaul "meaningful progress," but I know it was catastrophic for my practice and my patients.

When I got my first medical malpractice insurance bill after the 2021 legislative session, it was double what I had paid the previous year. I was shocked; I thought it must be a mistake. After all, I've never had a malpractice



Source: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services

JOURNAL

judgement against me. So, I called my insurance company. That's when I learned the increase was a direct result of the 2021 malpractice law. In 2025, the cost of malpractice insurance for an OB-GYN in New Mexico is a minimum of \$125,000 a year. These costs are also driving doctors out of independent practice and into large corporate institutions that can afford to cover those soaring malpractice premiums.



Debbie Vigil

After that, I tried everything I could to keep my doors open. My practice lost money in 2022 and 2023. If I stayed in business, my expenses would be so high I would be paying to practice. The medical malpractice increase was the final straw.

I watched the Legislature carefully in early 2023 for any sign that they would help me stay in practice. I went to testify at a hearing of the Legislature, but the legislators did not listen to the doctors' concerns. When the session ended, nothing had been done. I decided my only option was to close my practice. In July of 2023, I permanently closed my practice and retired several years earlier than I had planned. Had I been a young doctor, I would have had to make

the sad decision to leave my home state and move to Colorado or Texas.

I loved caring for my patients, and I wish I still could. When providers can't practice, patients can't get care. The patients who are most hurt by this situation are the ones who don't have the resources to leave the state, who already live in remote areas and whose voices are rarely heard in the state Legislature. Patients are suffering as a direct result of long wait times and complete lack of access to care.

If we are truly going to provide "real support for independent providers who want to keep their individual practice from being consumed by corporate interests," we can't ignore the elephant in the room. The trial lawyers are trying to deflect attention away from the major issue causing our provider shortage: the unbalanced medical malpractice law. Solving New Mexico's doctor shortage will require lawmakers to enact reasonable malpractice reforms like those recommended by Think New Mexico.

Debbie Vigil, MD, is a 20th generation New Mexican, born in Santa Fe at the old St. Vincent Hospital downtown (now the Drury Hotel) and raised in Chimayó.



FAMILY MEDICINE ASSOCIATES

Lawrence Andrade, MD.

Caring For My Community Since 2009

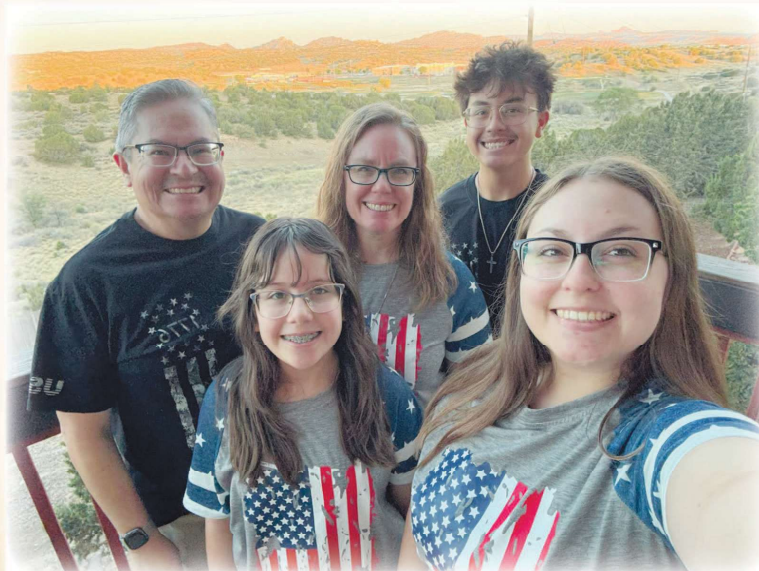
August 1

Dear Gallupians

On behalf of Doc Lawrence Andrade, Dr. Aedra Andrade, and our children, we want to thank everyone for the last 22 amazing years in my hometown. 22 years ago, this community welcomed Aedra and I back home as we began our medical career. You watched as our family grew from just the two of us to our current family. You supported us through the loss of our beautiful Angel, Santana Milagros Teresa, and then the loss of my parents. Your support helped us through those incredibly challenging times. We shared tears and grieved together, but also shared laughs, fun, and moments of joy, as well as pride in our community. This wonderful community has meant the world to us and we are truly humbled that you entrusted your medical care to us. We have learned from all of you as we strived to provide excellent care to every patient with compassion and respect, even though we don't always agree with each other. The community of Gallup is truly an amazing and special place with the most kind, generous and loving people you will find anywhere in the country.

Unfortunately, a very punitive medical malpractice system, high taxes (especially gross receipts taxes and state taxes for small businesses), decreasing Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements, and lack of medical specialists in New Mexico have made it increasingly difficult to provide the quality care we want to give our patients. We recently made the very difficult decision to leave our hometown, community and friends and move to Joplin, Missouri. We cannot fully express how grateful we are to each and every one of you for your unwavering support over the last 22 years. You treated us like family and we will never forget you. We don't know what the future holds, but we trust God's plans for us. We will definitely be back to visit, so this is not goodbye. Please take care of yourselves, continue to respect one another, and remain the amazing community we were blessed to be a part of for the last 22 years.

God is not dead! God bless you all!



With much love,

Doc Lawrence Andrade, Doctor Aedra Andrade, Iliana Andrade, Xavier Andrade,
Ysabelle Andrade, and forever in our hearts, Santana Milagros Teresa Andrade

MY VIEW MICHAL GAJEWSKI

Without tort reform, exodus of N.M. doctors will continue

As an anesthesiologist, I thought I was used to high risk and complex situations, but nothing in my clinical practice could have prepared me for the health care turmoil taking over our state. I moved to New Mexico five years ago at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since then, I have been a practicing anesthesiologist in Santa Fe and have also had the distinct honor of serving as the president of the New Mexico Society of Anesthesiologists. This has given me the unique position to interact with many anesthesiologists, both in-state as well as out-of-state, and it has shed some light on the many difficulties of being a physician in New Mexico. Most pressing, I would say, is the challenge of recruitment and retention.

This is because of the reputation that New Mexico has developed as having an aggressively predatory and litigious climate that often targets physicians, with several recent high-profile verdicts underscoring the risks. Notable cases include a \$40 million award against Presbyterian and an extraordinary \$412 million verdict involving a patient who visited NuMale Medical. This



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sends a clear message to physicians nationwide: Practicing in New Mexico carries an unusually high risk of catastrophic liability exposure.

These verdicts are not isolated; they reflect a legal climate that many feel is driven by malpractice attorneys and advocacy groups that operate under ostensibly neutral names — such as the “New Mexico Safety Over Profits” group — which function as coordinated trial lawyer networks focused on targeting health care providers. The resulting insurance premiums and fear of litigation make recruitment of anesthesiologists and all physicians extremely difficult.

Even beyond liability concerns, economic factors compound the problem. Anesthesiologists — like all recent medical graduates — leave training with staggering debt, often exceeding \$250,000. Choosing where to practice

becomes both a financial decision as much as a professional one. States offering higher pay, lower malpractice risk and stronger job security naturally attract these new graduates.

Unfortunately, New Mexico’s Medicaid reimbursement rates are among the lowest in the nation, and Medicaid covers a large share of our population, most of whom are uninsured. This means anesthesiologists and all physicians are often paid far less for the same work than in neighboring states.

This is why even our own residency graduates — who know these challenges well — choose to move elsewhere for better pay, lower risk and greater professional support. Without meaningful tort reform and a commitment to sustainable health care funding that allows physicians to keep their doors open, the shortage of anesthesiologists, and all physicians, in New Mexico will only deepen, jeopardizing timely, safe surgical care statewide.

Dr. Michal Gajewski has lived in New Mexico since 2020 and is a practicing anesthesiologist at Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center.