

Routine Physical Examinations for New Employees?

To the Editor:

The series of articles on Infection Control and Employee Health has been useful for me in my capacity as employee health physician at Tampa General Hospital, a 650-bed university affiliated hospital in Florida.

However, there is one position which Dr. Valenti has taken which may not be applicable to our circumstance. Because of my observations I think that perhaps others, too, might want to carefully consider whether they would follow his suggestions. Valenti seems convinced that routine physical examinations of new employees are not useful. Although in Rochester, New York this may be the case, it is not in Tampa, Florida. Let me cite some examples. In the past month, during my rotation as employee health physician, rotating among the various members of our Infectious and Tropical Diseases Division, I have been doing routine physicals on new employees. In that time period I discovered one young lady who was six weeks to two months pregnant but who denied knowledge of this fact and was slated for employment in an area of the hospital where she might have had significant exposure to toxins of some potential consequence to her infant. Several days later I discovered a stony hard lobular mass in the breast of another young woman who deserved referral to a gynecologist for further study. On an almost daily basis I see new employees whose behavior

during the physical examination verifies my suspicion that many hospital employees do not have regular health care. Their employee health questionnaire forms do not indicate a family physician. They ask questions during the examination which indicate to me that they have not ever had physical examinations before, and they are particularly unknowledgeable about such important issues as dental care, the hazards of smoking, adequate diet and nutrition, and regular exercise. Since health care workers in general are frequently considered to be models for behavior of other individuals in the community, I think that it is important for us to try to establish in our hospital employees good patterns of health care. The physical examination can be a learning experience for a hospital employee, one which may not be reproduced in the community. This is another reason why regular physical examinations in our hospitals are valuable.

One final comment—about two years ago the Director of Employee Health Service, an occupational health nurse, and I began to survey all of the health records of new employees whom we had approved during the previous year. Our goal was to determine the numbers and frequency of detection of significant abnormalities as a result of our pre-admission laboratory screening and physical exams. We examine an average of slightly more than four new employees per day, so that this represented a reasonably large sample of individuals. After completing the review of records for six months of employment, we had discovered close to 100 significant lab-

oratory or physical examination findings including blood disorders, urinary infections, serious dental disease, possible malignancy, endocrine abnormalities such as hyperthyroidism, cardiac valvular disease, and one patient with previously undetected solitary bronchogenic carcinoma. The press of other duties forced us to discontinue this study, but I think that it serves to underscore our reasons for continuing the pre-employment physical as a necessary part of new employee screening.

The bottom line is that population characteristics differ from one urban area of the country to another, and it may be necessary for those establishing employee health programs to assess their own community practices before they make decisions about what constitutes proper pre-employment screening.

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Dr. William Valenti, author of "Employee Health and Infection Control" was invited to respond to Dr. Craig's comments.

Dr. Craig's comments illustrate the fact that there really is more than one correct way to run an employee health program or any other program, for that matter. The objectives of the employee health program will help determine whether or not a physical