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Are X-rays used too much?
by Julian Reed MPP (Halton-Barlington)
There has been considerable controversy on
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686 hospital and medical premises using X-ray equipment, only 207 have volunteered for certification.
We also learned that fewer than one-third of the Ministry of Health's own X-ray equipment operators working in chest clinics around the province are registered radiological technicians.
There was considerable concern about a 1973 Health Ministry report, on which no government action has been taken, which warned that chiropractors who owned their own equipment administered an excessive number of X-rays and recommended that they no longer be able to claim from OHIP for X-rays, but instead be allowed to refer patients to radiologists. A spokesman for Ontario chiropractors stated, at a press conference, that it would be a big mistake to ban such X-rays which are a necessary diagnostic tool. He said that chiropractors receive about 450 hours of classroom and on-the-job instruction.

There were other problem areas. For instance, 50 per cent of U.S. technologists did not meet the standards of their professional society, and some 27 million repeat X-rays had to be taken because films were either too dark or too light, or the patient had been positioned the wrong way. He concluded that poorly trained technicians were one of the major problems in the U.S. medical world.

In the midst of the present controversy in Ontario, the two radiation experts who originally sounded the alarm here issued a statement urging the public not to refuse any X-ray prescribed by a doctor, because by refusing such a diagnostic examination the patient runs a greater risk from failure to find serious disease.

According to them, the risk of getting cancer from an abdominal X-ray is equal to that of smoking 32 cigarettes. They also said that work is well under way to correcting the situation through educational programs for staff operating

the X-ray machines and inspections in hospitals throughout Ontario, with equipment being re-adjusted where necessary. In future, they maintain that groups of radiation experts will have to be stationed in hospitals and clinics across the province to ensure quality control.

A physician writing a column in a Toronto paper suggests that patients should follow the same approach as doctors, who never submit to questionable films. The key question to ask, he says, is "Would you get X-rays, doctor, if you had this problem?"

Obviously, any major change in body function is cause for concern, although sometimes the symptoms have a comparatively simple explanation. In many instances, films are only necessary if time and moderation fail to relieve the situation.

Doctors tend to protect their families from defensive X-rays. It's been estimated that in the United States about 30 per cent of all X-rays are done for fear of future malpractice suits. Physicians want to use every precaution to guarantee that nothing has been overlooked.

A member of a doctor's family is likely to have a sprained ankle strapped up and forget about an X-ray. Similarly a doctor's child won't be subjected to X-rays of the skull unless there's been a serious injury. They know that only one in every thousand skull films show a fracture.

What about dental X-rays? Most physicians agree to full-mouth films every few years. Then selective ones at yearly visits. However, they would doubtless object to a complete series of X-rays every six months