

Commentary

Are x-rays safe to use?

(Editor's note: Dr. Leon Herschfus is chairman of the Southfield Board of Health. In the following guest commentary, he discusses the harmful effect of diagnostic x-rays, fluoridated water and biased criticism.)

By DR. LEON HERSCHFUS

There have been charges and allegations that an important contributing factor to the high incidence of cancer and leukemia in our country is the indiscriminate use of x-rays by both the medical and dental professions. Cited as a specific example of this abuse is the overutilization of dental x-rays with some "experts" stating that 80-90 per cent of these have no diagnostic value.

One of these experts, Dr. Robert Mendelsohn, in replying to an inquiry about the harmful effects of dental x-rays on women of child-bearing age, confirmed the woman's apprehension and fear by stating that patients are often so much smarter than doctors.

He quoted a certain Dr. Morgan who said, "As far as radiation is concerned, the worst offender has been the medical profession, particularly dentists."

As an aside, the same Dr. Mendelsohn also attacked the safety and efficiency of fluoridation by quoting from National Fluoridation News, an avowed anti-fluoridation news pamphlet.

PUBLIC awareness and concern over potential health hazards are welcome. Indeed, so are the criticisms of syndicated columnists, provided that information released is unbiased and predicated on scientific research rather than just an exercise of capricious criticism of the medical and dental professions. Such misleading information serves no useful purpose and may prevent the patient from seeking necessary health care because of the fear of the alleged harmful effects of x-rays.

A more appropriate and prudent answer to the question of whether dental x-rays are really dangerous cannot be an unequivocal yes or no. After all, a modality such as an x-ray used injudiciously and carelessly can be dangerous. Furthermore, it is recognized that the public is exposed at all times to natural radiation and that even low dose dental x-rays can contribute to the total amount of radiation.

However, if there is a real indication and need for an x-ray study, then the benefits outweigh the potential hazard and an x-ray should be taken. An emphasis on real indication and real need curtails over use and abuse of x-rays.

To calm the public's fears, precautionary measures to reduce over-exposure to dental x-rays would be the use of a high speed film to minimize exposure time, shielding the patient with a lead apron and checking out the x-ray machine periodically. An important diagnostic tool such as a dental x-ray should not be shelved and discarded by scare criticism.

It is high time that the public—our patients—get the facts and not misleading opinions regarding the effects of diagnostic x-rays and fluoridated water and that the real hazards and harmful effects come from the biased criticism of misinformed "experts."

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