

Orthopaedic Connection

Unnecessary Diagnostic Imaging

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

The United States population is the most imaged (x-rayed) people in the world as a country. Yikes!

You might say yes, but most of the world is poor and their healthcare is far below ours. True, but I am comparing our healthcare with some countries that provide excellent care at least equivalent to our own. United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, and Canada – all are x-raying their population at a much lower rate than ours.

Extra x-ray studies, in this case what doctors refer to as “Diagnostic Imaging” is not necessarily good medicine. It is expensive however, and is contributing greatly to our increase in healthcare spending which is also among the highest in the world.

In Some Cases It’s Bad Medicine

The alarming increase for example, in magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the spine has not been accompanied by improved outcomes.

Over utilization of MRI studies of the lumbar spine I believe, correlates directly with the three fold increase in back surgery in recent years.

Have we suddenly had a three fold increase in patients injuring their back or backs wearing out way more than they did before?

The answer is no, of course. 80% of the adult population has back pain at one time or another. Lots of people have it all the time to some degree.

That has been an established medical fact forever.

So What’s The Point?

Since the appearance of CT first, then MRI doctors are ordering these studies at an alarmingly increased rate. And the findings generated on the x-ray reports are impressive and often scary to the doctor ordering the study and the patient.

Conservative treatment may simply be to give it more time depending on the situation. In addition, non narcotic medication and perhaps muscle relaxants are indicated initially.

Please no Norco, Vicodin, Percocet, epidural injections, etc.

If that approach is not working, the patient should be seen at a physical therapy place skilled at handling back and neck problems. Some places are much better at this than others i.e. all physical therapy places are not created equal.

Back Problems Do Not Exist In A Vacuum

I rarely see a patient with a significant back problem that does not have a lot of other problems that overlap with the back pain that definitely make controlling the back pain much harder.

Other problems such as:

- Overweight
- Deconditioned muscles
- Arthritis of knees and/or hips
- Diabetes
- Neuropathy
- Poor balance

- Foot and ankle problems

At least good physical therapy has to be done, but the other factors can't be ignored if PT has a chance to work.

Our discussion has involved spine problems which I will conclude next week but the “problem” of Unnecessary Diagnostic Imaging is far greater than spine alone. I will get into that also so please keep reading as I want my reader group to be as smart as a tree full of owls!

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