

CHAIRMAN FRANK PALLONE, JR.
HEALTH SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING
"MEDICAL RADIATION: AN OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUES"
OPENING STATEMENT
February 26, 2010

"Today the Subcommittee is meeting to discuss the topic "Medical Radiation: An Overview of the Issues." By now, I am sure many of you have read or at least heard of the New York Times article series on medical radiation errors. The patient stories highlighted in those articles are heart-wrenching and have raised huge concerns and questions for me as well as for many of my fellow members in the House of Representatives.

"Let me start by saying however, that medical radiation undoubtedly saves lives. It has reshaped the world of diagnostics and has offered patients less invasive alternatives for treating complex and life-threatening conditions.

"I know there was concern that by having this hearing, Congress would be sending the message that medical radiation is bad. I would like to assure you, this is not the case. It is important that patients do not stop going to their scheduled treatments, or getting their CT scans when they need them. We are not here today to make the statement that medical radiation should not be used.

"But we are here today to learn more about the field and to examine what the driving factors are when things go wrong. Due to the dangerous nature of these technologies, when things do go wrong, the effects on patients are horrendous.

"As mentioned, the benefits that we as a society have gained from these advancements are enormous. But we often forget the fact that we are still dealing with something that is toxic to the human body. When it is delivered correctly, a single CT scan can deliver as much radiation as 300 hundred chest x-rays. With operating technology as powerful and dangerous as this, it is even more crucial that quality and safety are always front and center. But tragically, as highlighted in the articles, this is not always the case. A procedure with such a small margin of error should be stringently overseen and monitored, but these critical steps appear to be sorely lacking.

"With all the advancements the industry has made, these technologies have become more complex and complicated to operate. It is shocking to me that in many states individuals who operate these devices do not need to be licensed and are therefore not regulated at all in terms of education and expertise. Even in states where there are licensing requirements, the requirements to report errors and the penalties for making errors are basically non-existent or not enforced. As a result, we have no idea how often these errors occur and have no good data on where the weaknesses in the system truly are.

“Part of the problem could be the fact that no single agency has authority over the entire spectrum of issues related to medical radiation and because of this, things are more likely to fall through the cracks. I am eager to hear from our witnesses today about this, and what problems it presents.

“In addition to the lack of oversight from a regulatory perspective, there also appears to be very little guidance to physicians on the appropriateness of use of these technologies, especially with respect to radiation dosage and life-time exposure of radiation. I know one of our witnesses today will go into more detail on this issue but for example, dosing for the same CT scan can vary by huge amounts, between and within facilities.

“In addition, there are questions as to the appropriateness of use of these scans. I know from personal experience, that health care providers are very quick to order yet another CT scan, without talking to patients about the health risks let alone the cumulative effects of multiple scans. Many in Congress have questioned the overuse of medical imaging but for the most part, those conversations have centered on cost implications. I have to wonder though if there are not also health implications as well. I am eager to hear from our witnesses today about this issue and what is being done to study the long-term, cumulative effects of medical radiation.

“Our witnesses today are all intimately familiar with these types of technologies; the possibilities they hold, and the dangers they can present. I would like to welcome you all; especially Ken Mizrach who has travelled here from my home state of New Jersey and Mr. Parks whose son’s story was featured in one of the New York Times articles. We appreciate you taking the time to speak to the committee on this very important issue. And I look forward to what I hope will be an engaging conversation.”

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