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Academy of Pediatrics beefs up protections

Bradley case inspires new recommendations

By *DAN SHORTRIDGE*
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Pediatricians around the country are being urged to screen employees for past records of abuse and develop policies about chaperoned medical exams in the wake of the Dr. Earl B. Bradley pedophilia case.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, citing the Bradley case, released its first policy on protecting children from abuse by health care providers, telling doctors and hospitals to train their staffs to make formal reports of complaints -- "not simply to pass the provider and issue on to some other setting."

Bradley was accused of raping or assaulting more than 100 girls he treated, most of them too young to speak, with many attacks recorded by him on video. He was convicted on June 23 on all 24 counts of rape, assault and sexual exploitation of a child lodged against him. Sentencing is set for Aug. 26, when he will receive a sentence of life in prison.

While sexual abuse by physicians is extremely rare, cases such as Bradley's are cause for concern and attention, said Dr. Cindy Christian, a Philadelphia pediatrician who co-authored the group's position, which will be published in the August issue of the journal *Pediatrics*.

"Earl Bradley is unfortunately not the only one," said Christian, who holds an endowed chair at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia in the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

Still, she said, the vast majority of parents should be vigilant, but not concerned.

"We want to increase awareness, but we don't want parents to think that any kind of genital examination is a sign of sexual abuse," Christian said. "I want them to be aware, but not to panic."

The eight-page statement says that Bradley's case has "reminded us that some among the pediatric profession may use their position of authority and trust to take advantage of their patients" and called such reports "a profound betrayal of their responsibility for patient well-being, trust, and medical ethics."

In response to revelations by *The News Journal* and two independent investigations into the Bradley case, Delaware legislators reformed the state's medical disciplinary laws.

They imposed increased fines and the possibility of license revocation for medical officials who don't fulfill their legal duty to report suspected misconduct by a doctor; opened doctors' disciplinary hearings to the public; and made it easier to get an emergency suspension.

Also, doctors seeking to get or renew a license now must disclose all previous investigations into their behavior -- not just those resulting in punishment.

The report's recommendations include:

» Educating medical trainees and pediatrics workers about "appropriate provider-patient boundaries"

and use of chaperones.

- » Screening workers for previous abuse cases through state registries and by checking with past employers.
- » Educating doctors about genital examinations and performing routine exams during annual check-ups.
- » Having pediatricians explain each part of the exam to parents, offer chaperones and provide them when requested or required.

The academy earlier this year revised its policy on the use of chaperones during pediatric exams, saying a parent or guardian should always be present during an exam of an infant, toddler or child. Another chaperone, preferably a nurse or medical assistant, should be present if a parent is unavailable or if there are possible abuse or parental mental health issues.

There are only scattered reports on the scope of the problem of sexual abuse by doctors or other medical professionals. In one Indiana study the AAP cited, 0.85 percent of children in hospitals and psychiatric facilities suffered sexual abuse. News Journal research found dozens of doctors who have been accused of abusing hundreds of children over the last 10 years.

Bradley, who came to Delaware in 1994 after being cleared of an abuse claim in Pennsylvania, was arrested in December 2009 and convicted in June of raping or abusing more than 85 children over several years. Under Delaware law, he must receive life in prison when he is sentenced Aug. 26.

Christian said the Bradley case hasn't changed much about the way pediatricians outside Delaware care for patients.

"I think most pediatricians practice excellent medicine, and provide incredibly good care to children around this country," she said. "This is a small, but obviously terrible, problem."
