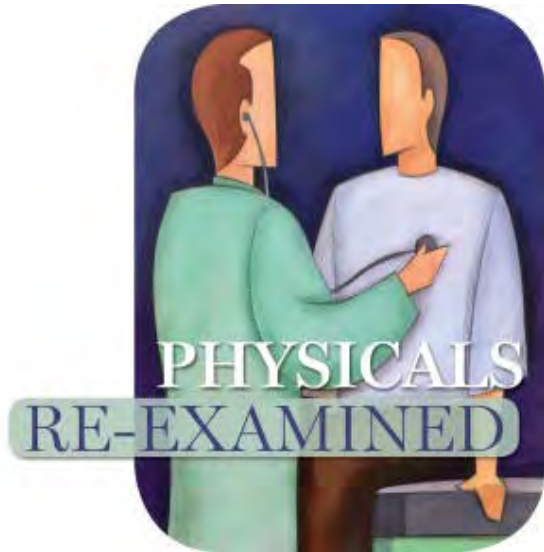


Has technology made the annual physical exam a dying art for physicians?

By Stephanie Cary Staff Writer, January 19, 2011

There you are again, sitting on the examination table with the paper overlay crinkling beneath you as you wait to be poked and prodded by a doctor.



It's an annual tradition, or at least it's supposed to be.

The yearly physical exam is a long-standing practice for physicians that some say has changed - for better and, perhaps, for worse - with the advancement of technology.

One of those people is Dr. Camelia Davtyan, a clinical professor of general internal medicine at UCLA and a 22-year veteran of the medical field.

Physical exams consist of assessing the organ systems to ensure everything is normal, says Davtyan.

When she conducts a physical, she includes a brief eye test to see if the pupils react to light or if there are any visible abnormalities. Then she checks the ears, sinuses, throat, neck, chest, lungs, heart, abdomen and skin.

But it doesn't stop there.

She also completes a neurological exam and - depending on the patient - a breast or prostate exam, along with a discussion of the patient's health history and counseling for any health-related behavioral issues such as smoking or diet.

She covers all of this within 30 minutes.

"Well, we have to fit it in," Davtyan said. "It didn't use to be like that in the olden days but nowadays it's just a different world."

It's especially different for Davtyan, who is a native of Romania, where she attended medical school. She says at the time of her training, the country had minimal technology available so she was trained to give more thorough physical exams.

Davtyan says she can see pros and cons to how cutting-edge technology has influenced the way physical exams are handled.

Though physicals have a margin for error, she cautions, the latest technology allows doctors to conduct tests to confirm diagnoses.

At the same time, however, Davtyan acknowledges that doctors' increasing reliance on technology may be decreasing their ability to identify problems on their own during routine patient visits.



\$10,000. (Photo courtesy of GE Healthcare)

"I think technology has helped our diagnostic accuracy," Davtyan said. "But if you would get a retired physician who was trained 30 years ago with one of our new graduates these days, the retired physician will have much better physical examination skills than our newer trainees."

Dr. Abraham Verghese, an author and professor at Stanford University School of Medicine, would tend to agree.

Verghese says technology has turned the physical exam into a dying art. So he and his colleagues developed the

"Stanford 25," a list of physical-exam skills they say every doctor should know, including how to perform a

A doctor uses Vscan ultrasound technology to get a real-time view inside a patient's body. The pocket-size machine costs about

thyroid exam, how to evaluate common gait abnormalities and how to detect liver disease.

The technological advancements Davtyan and Verghese are talking about have led to diagnostic equipment such as ultrasounds, CT scans and blood-testing capabilities.

Last year, GE Healthcare launched a pocket-sized visualization tool called Vscan, which uses ultrasound technology to allow doctors to see inside the body in real-time.

But instead of impairing doctors' diagnostic skills during physical exams, Agnes Berzsenyi, general manager of GE Healthcare's Global Primary Care Ultrasound division, says the goal is to improve the exam.

"(Vscan) was developed so that physicians can have some imaging capabilities at the point of care at physical exams," Berzsenyi said.

"It truly has the potential to redefine the way doctors are examining patients," she said. "I mean, if you think about it, until recently the physical exam was limited to only what a doctor can hear or feel and this often actually delayed diagnostics or treatment."

The company got the idea for Vscan after hearing from doctors who had trouble simply getting equipment for tests during physical exams, says Berzsenyi.

The roughly \$10,000 device weighs less than 1 pound and can fit into a pocket, making it accessible at all times.

GE Healthcare launched Vscan in the U.S. last February and has sold units in Europe and Asia. About 1,000 units have been sold to date.

"We have situations where physicians bought it out of their own pocket because they saw that it can improve the quality of the physical exam," Berzsenyi said. "And in many cases, it was purchased by the office or by the hospital."

But despite advanced technology and all the diagnostic capabilities that come with it, Davtyan says she still emphasizes the physical exam to her medical students at UCLA, to ensure they are able to identify abnormalities.

"I can't speak for the whole medical community," she said, "but I am a teaching physician here at UCLA and we actually emphasize the physical examination a lot to our students, and we still teach it quite well."

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Find out more

Dr. Abraham Verghese and his colleagues at Stanford University School of Medicine developed the "Stanford 25," a list of physical exam skills they consider important for physicians to have. To see the list, go to <http://medicine.stanford.edu/education/stanford25.html>

Story URL - http://www.dailybreeze.com/lifeandculture/ci_17139043