

# NATION

## Middle-school genital exams criticized

By Cheryl Wetzstein  
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Pediatricians from around the country say conducting genital exams of girls as young as 11 is medically advisable but that such exams should be carried out only with the consent of the patients and their parents.

The physicians were commenting on a middle school in eastern Pennsylvania that recently conducted genital exams of 59 sixth-grade girls — some without their parents' knowledge or consent.

"The examination of the external genitalia is important, but you've got to do it right," said Dr. Thomas Fitch, a pediatrician in San Antonio.

Dr. Fitch and other doctors said such examinations should include an explanation of the procedure and be conducted with respect for the youngster's modesty.

In March, 59 girls at J.T. Lambert Intermediate School in East Stroudsburg were marched to the school nurse's office, ordered to take off their clothes and then examined one by one by a female pediatrician.

Genital exams, "even though there may be discomfort, are medically appropriate," said Dr. Peter D. Rappo, a pediatrician in West Bridgeport, Mass., and chairman of the American Academy of Pediatrics committee that wrote the group's guidelines.

"But I don't think anybody should have something done to or for them without them understanding what's going to be done," Dr. Rappo said. "If you're going to do [a genital] exam, it's incumbent on you as a physician to say, 'This is what we're going to do' and 'This is why we're going to do it.'"

Two weeks ago, East Stroudsburg School District issued a summary of its investigation into parents' complaints about the genital exams, saying the exams were necessary and "no improprieties" occurred.

Pennsylvania law requires all sixth-graders to undergo a physical exam, either in a family doctor's office or at school; the 59 girls examined at school had not turned in reports from their own doctors,

### Risk of venereal warts is low for 11-year-olds, expert says

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Physicians and parents are questioning why a female pediatrician conducted a genital examination of 59 girls in an eastern Pennsylvania middle school in March.

Dr. Ramlah Vahanvaty of East Stroudsburg, Pa., said she was looking for genital warts on girls at J.T. Lambert Intermediate School.

"What [the exam] involved is an external examination of the labia to see if there were any warts or vaginal lesions. You can't see these if you don't retract the [labia]," Dr. Vahanvaty told a local newspaper a few days after the exams.

"They said they were looking for warts, but on a sixth-grader?" said Katie Tucker, mother of one of the girls who was examined.

Genital or venereal warts, also known as the human papilloma virus, or HPV, are very common and very contagious, experts say. HPV can be treated fairly easily, but it is a serious medical condition because it can heighten the risk for cervical cancer.

But Dr. Joe A. McIlhaney, a Texas gynecologist and expert on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), said the risk of HPV among 11-year-old girls is low because HPV is transmitted sexually and most 11-year-old

girls are not sexually active.

For girls who have had sexual encounters, the risk of HPV is high because their partners often are older men who probably have had other sexual partners and been exposed to the virus, said Dr. McIlhaney, president of the Medical Institute for Sexual Health in Austin.

He also questioned Dr. Vahanvaty's technique: Genital warts in a female often are deep inside the body and can only be detected by an internal exam, he said.

Even in cases in which warts are visible, they often are so small that it takes considerable inspection to find them. "So a cursory exam is totally inadequate for what she was looking for," Dr. McIlhaney concluded.

Rachael R. Heath, assistant superintendent for the East-Stroudsburg School District, said Friday that Dr. Vahanvaty was looking for abnormalities and signs of abuse as well as warts — all of which are medically advised by national guidelines.

"I am not aware of anything in the recent past involving any type of a venereal disease outbreak in the East Stroudsburg area," a Pennsylvania State Department of Health spokesman said last week.

— Cheryl Wetzstein

school officials said.

Dr. Ramlah Vahanvaty, a pediatrician in East Stroudsburg — about 70 miles north of Philadelphia — conducted the exams. They were needed "to see if there were any warts or vaginal lesions," she told a local newspaper.

However, some parents did not know their daughters were to go to be examined. Others did not realize the exam would include a genital inspection.

rumors have fueled so many "threatening, obscene and harassing phone calls" to school personnel that they are now tracing phone calls and "seeking the assistance of law-enforcement agencies in prosecuting these individuals to the fullest extent of the law."

The Pennsylvania State Department of Health and the Pennsylvania State Police both have concluded that the school's examinations were "within the parameters" of the law.

Rachael R. Heath, assistant superintendent for the school district, said Friday that the school will change its policy to require permission slips from parents of children who need exams.

"And if parents feel uncomfortable with a part of the exam and don't want that done, that's their right — they can say no to that," Ms. Heath said, adding that paper gowns would be used in future exams.

Audrey Bailey-Hocher, the guardian of a niece who was examined, said she has been talking with the American Civil Liberties Union about her case.

"That exam had no place in that school, especially without a parent present," said Mrs. Bailey-Hocher, who teaches health and science in a New York City public school.

She said she missed the exam notices because her family had just moved to the area. She said when she saw the news in the local paper, "I spoke to my niece and asked her what kind of exam did you have, and she started crying. She said, 'I didn't know what to say,'" Mrs. Bailey-Hocher said.

Examining children on school premises may be justified if it is done under very structured conditions and if there is evidence of a contagious epidemic or suspicion of sexual activity, said Dr. Eugene Diamond, former head of the pediatrics department at Stritch School of Medicine at Loyola University, Chicago.

"But just screening a large group of girls for a sexually transmitted disease without any information about them? That would be a very serious matter," he said.

"If I had only known, I wouldn't have given my consent," said Anna Maria Brocca, who said her "very modest" daughter was still unsettled by the experience.

Some parents have said that girls were screaming and crying, that nurses blocked doors and refused to allow the girls to call home, and that one girl tried to jump from a window.

School officials insist that these are exaggerations and that such