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If Clinically Indicated

Among my pet (not a pun) peeves is the almost routine use by nuclear clinicians of the phrase "if clinically indicated" at the end of a report interpreting a nuclear medicine procedure. "A CT scan may be helpful, if clinically indicated..." What does this mean? A CT scan, or any other thoughtlessly recommended procedure, **may** be helpful even if it is **not** clinically indicated. The issue is rather: are findings observed on the nuclear medicine procedure to suggest that an additional procedure is indicated? If so, the note should clearly indicate that, or even better, the referring physician should be called, informed of the results and of which additional procedures might be indicated.

I recently learned that "*if clinically indicated...*" is appended so as not to create medical-legal pressure to perform a study which is deemed unnecessary at the time in view of all of the clinical information. All the more reason why communication directly with the referring indication is preferable. Why recommend something that is not clinically indicated? And what if the procedure had already been done? In that instance, the nuclear medicine physician (hopefully) can then comment on the significance of that finding on the nuclear medicine procedure. After all, he or she was about to recommend that procedure "*if clinically indicated.*"

When a nuclear medicine physician recommends an additional procedure, he or she should have a clear concept about how the results of that additional procedure will influence the diagnostic or management process. Sometimes the nuclear procedure has, in fact, been requested because of a finding on another previously performed procedure. This information may or may not have been communicated on the nuclear medicine request. If it was, it may have been overlooked. We do not look like very astute observers if, after the administration of radioactivity and imaging various body parts for up to an hour or perhaps over several days, the best we can do is to recommend a procedure that had already been performed and was the basis for the nuclear medicine study in the first place. Are we saying that the nuclear medicine study is unnecessary?

Nuclear medicine is more than scan interpretation. It requires assessment of the patient's status prior to the scan, assurance that the procedure is properly performed, correct interpretation of the scan, and a consideration of the significance of the findings for the particular patient, as well as assessing if additional procedures in view of these findings will clarify the diagnosis or influence the management course. Nuclear medicine is not benefited by the thoughtless appending of an imprecise interpretation with the soporific phrase "if clinically indicated." We might do better to recommend "*an apple a day...*"

Stanley J. Goldsmith, MD

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