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Conventional Chest Films Can Reveal Emphysema, BUT NOT COPD

An article appearing in the Review section of (this month's) American Journal of Medicine should be of interest to many readers of Chest. It deals with the value of conventional chest radiography both for the diagnosis and for exclusion of the diagnosis of emphysema. Most chest physicians are aware that this has been a subject of controversy and conflicting reports for many years. The article reviews each of the relevant articles and explains how differences in the criteria used by, and in the intentions of, the various authors have led to diametrically opposite conclusions. The point is made that technical procedures are so different that poor results in one study should not be construed as reducing the validity of successful interpretations in any other study.

While not wishing to repeat here the evidence and reasoning presented in the review article, one of the key points does merit reemphasis. This point concerns the role of the currently accepted definition of emphysema which is based on its effects on lung structure. In considering the value of radiography in emphysema, it is necessary to adhere strictly to this definition. Several autopsy studies have shown that emphysema can be present and can involve as much as 25 or 30 percent of the lung in asymptomatic patients, many of whom can even have normal forced expiratory flow rates. Autopsy studies have also shown that some patients who do have symptoms of respiratory impairment and do have reduced expiratory flow rates (and may even have died from respiratory failure), do not have any emphysema.

In furtherance of this concept, radiologists and others who interpret chest films should be especially careful to avoid use of the term "obstructive lung disease." They should use instead the term "emphysema" and determine whether a patient's films meet or do not meet the criteria for that diagnosis. Clinical observation or physiologic testing will reveal the presence or absence of obstructive impairment. The radiologic information will be useful in either clinical situation.

For further details, readers should examine the review article.1

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REFERENCES
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