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Environment Department Issues CT Scan Advisory

(Santa Fe, NM) — In response to a series of recent media reports of members of the public seeking CT or CAT (computed axial tomography) scans without a licensed physician's referral, The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) wishes to advise the public of the dangers that can be posed by these radiation-producing machines. While CT scans are an excellent tool in the diagnosis and management of many medical conditions, they do expose people to significant doses of radiation.

“The irony of modern medicine is that many of its most powerful tools—chemotherapy, radio-medicine, CT scans—can also be quite harmful,” said NMED Secretary Ron Curry. “That is why these approaches should not be self-prescribed. The recommendation of a trained and licensed physician ensures that the approach is the best one for the specific need or ailment.”

Any exposure to radiation has associated risks. A typical whole-body CT scan delivers an effective radiation dose about 250 times greater than a patient receives in a chest x-ray (1.5 rem versus 6 millirem). As with any medical diagnostic x-ray examination, there should be a good, medically sound reason for the radiation exposure. Based on the cancer mortality rates for acute radiation doses predicted by the National Research Council, one in 833 persons will potentially suffer a cancer-related mortality from undergoing a typical whole body CT exam.

To protect the public, NMED has notified facilities which operate CT scanners in the State of New Mexico that using these devices to screen members of the public without a licensed physician's referral is a violation of the New Mexico Radiation Protection Regulations. These regulations are enforced with fines of up to \$15,000 a day for violations.

Scans need to be performed and interpreted by qualified individuals and only at the prescription of a licensed physician. Individuals who want to have a CT scan should contact their doctor to make sure it is needed and to make sure they get the proper medical follow-up to interpret the results of these exams.

For more information contact Jon Goldstein, NMED Communications Director, at (505) 827-0314.

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