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Sunday, September 17, 2006

# LIVING WITH RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS?

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## TeenScreen: Invaluable help or invasion of civil rights?

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MISHAWAKA - Teresa Rhoades had never heard of TeenScreen until her daughter, Chelsea, a student at Penn High School in Mishawaka, came home from school in December, 2004, and asked a question.



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"What's OCD and social anxiety disorder?" the 15-year-old quizzed her mother. Thus began an odyssey that has turned into a lawsuit against the Penn-Harris-Madison School Corporation, various school administrators and Madison Center Inc., the community mental health center for St. Joseph County.

At the center of the lawsuit is a mental health screening test called TeenScreen that the Rhoades say was administered to their daughter without their permission.

"Chelsea said a lady at the school said that was what was 'wrong' with her, that she had OCD - obsessive-compulsive disorder - and social anxiety disorder," Rhoades said. "She was quite devastated. She's a good student and she had good rapport with all her teachers.

"She's a mentor for handicapped kids. And they just pulled her aside and said she had these two things. She was told it was because of the way she answered questions on this survey."

TeenScreen is a mental health screening tool designed by Columbia University and administered in dozens of school systems in 43 states. On its Web site at TeenScreen.org, the organization says the test should always be voluntary. But such was not the case at Penn High, Rhoades alleges.

And, while TeenScreen officials say it is never to be used as a diagnostic tool, apparently in this instance it was, according to the Rhoades' lawsuit.

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While TeenScreen declined to share its test questions with this newspaper, rogue copies of it proliferate on the Internet. Plus, Rhoades was able to obtain it from Madison Center, although they refused to give her the actual test her daughter took.

"I was getting a run-around and I couldn't get any answers on this," Rhoades said. "And, the idea that they had a medical record on my daughter, which could follow her the rest of her life - a record that we don't think is even correct - is outrageous."

Supposedly, the test is anonymous, and students are given identification numbers that keep it that way. "But they pulled up my daughter's records immediately," Rhoades counters. "How can that be anonymous? Absolutely, it is not."

Rhoades has joined a growing movement nationwide to stop mental health testing in schools. The questions are too subjective, the evaluation can have too many false-positives and, in instances where states have legislated mental health testing, cases have come where parents actually have lost custody of their children for refusing the testing, whether it is TeenScreen or any other diagnostic tool, Rhoades says.

Rhoades also has joined Indiana Rep. Jackie Walorski in her fight to repeal Senate Enrolled Act 529, which includes a section mandating mental health screening for all Indiana children, birth to 22, through schools and health care providers.

"Birth to 22 - how can you say a newborn or an 8-week-old child has depression?" Rhoades said. "That's the most ludicrous thing I ever heard."

"And, what's going to be the repercussions here for parents who won't agree to it? If we don't get this defeated, not only are parents going to have to treat their children (with mental health-related drugs) but statewide databanks are going to be mandated in a way that bypasses the HIPAA law.

"Every day this gets scarier."

**TeenScreen talks**

While the Rhoades and other opponents of universal mental health testing for children believe it is an invasion of parents' and children's' civil rights, proponents believe it helps identify children in need of help. Suicide prevention, in particular, is a goal of TeenScreen.

"One of the first and most important things I can say about TeenScreen is that we do not support mandated mental health screening," said Leslie McGuire, director of the TeenScreen program.

"This is something we feel very strongly is a family decision. Our goal is simply to make mental health checkups available to them if they want them, not forced."

McGuire admitted that TeenScreen has opponents who would like to see it dropped from use altogether anywhere in the nation. She also acknowledged that the screening tool's questions have been highly debated and shared around the Internet.

"But you need to know not to believe all the test questions you see posted there, because some of them have questions that make me wonder, where did they come from," she said.

She declined to share the questions with this newspaper.

"What is controversial," she said, "is that they say the kids take a 10-minute test and end up getting treated with psychiatric medications. But we insist that both the parents and teens have given their consent, first.

"Then they take one of two screening questionnaires, which do take

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about 10 minutes. Then, those that test negative (for certain problems or behaviors) have a brief chat with a counselor. The positives go for an interview with a trained health professional, who helps determine whether they need a clinical evaluation.

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"But it is not a diagnosis. Is to only to find out who needs a more complete mental health evaluation, something similar to a pap smear - which can help your doctor determine if you need more tests."

McGuire added that research shows that this is an effective tool to help children with mental health issues.

"Kids with mental illness are suffering silently," she said. "It also should be said that kids with mental illness aren't able to effectively learn, or learn as well, if they have something else going on, and there are kids who have these problems.

"These tests can help identify them and if you intervene early, they can get help. If you have these tools, why would you want to keep them from the parents?"

### Supporting Documents

- ▶ [Children's Social, Emotional and Behavioral Health Plan](#)
- ▶ [SEA 529](#)

### Related Links

- ▶ [TeenScreen](#)
- ▶ [TeenScreen Truth](#)
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