

HUP SAYS NO TO TESTING JOB APPLICANTS FOR SMOKING



The Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (HUP) has taken a stand against the practice of screening job applicants for nicotine use, despite many hospitals across the country participating in the practice. On December 30, the hospital in Danville, Pa., run by Geisinger Health System, announced that it would begin testing for nicotine in applicants. It also announced that it would test applicants for illegal substances including cocaine and marijuana. The hospital said that it will only hire non-smokers for its staff. Should an applicant meet the hospital's requirements for a job opening but that applicant smokes, the applicant will be given six months to try to quit smoking if they want the job. The initiative for hiring non-smokers has been put into motion in an effort to promote a culture of wellness. Pennsylvania is one of only 19 states in the country that permits employers to screen its job applicants for signs that they smoke. HUP did consider starting a program back in February to screen applicants but it decided against doing so because it did not see the program as an effective method. Frank Leone, the Director of Penn's smoking treatment programs, said that screening out applicants who are smokers "underestimates the nature of the problem." "It's born of a misconception," he said. Leone went on to explain that people often see smoking as a lifestyle choice even though it is a disability that he says affects the neurobiology of the smoker. Leone said he views the screening as discriminatory and also said that applicants with diabetes and hypertension are not weeded out of the process, so it is not a fair practice to do it with the smokers. He also went on to say that companies tend to test for tobacco in an effort to save money on insurance premiums, which results in fewer employees of lower socioeconomic groups being offered jobs and employment. "I don't advocate for policies along those lines," Leone said, referring to the tobacco screenings. In a different vein, he said that hospitals should encourage its current staff to quit smoking. Susan Phillips, a HUP spokesperson, agrees with Leone and said that HUP utilizes incentives for its employees, such as enrolling in cessation programs. There are free programs and support groups for all of the hospital's employees. The hospital, beginning on July 1, will also be offering employees healthcare discounts if they do not use tobacco. Marcy Marshall, a spokesperson for Geisinger, said that the hospital's new policy is "a continued commitment to the health of our employees." "Smoking is the worst thing you can do to your body," she added. "We want to encourage our employees and community to be healthy." The Cleveland Clinic was the first company to initiate this non-smoking policy. The policy put in place by the Danville hospital is an extension of the policy put in place back in 2007 that says no one can smoke on the property of the hospital. Phillips also said that she disagrees with the policy because it "has been found not to be a reliable way of identifying smokers."

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