

Workers question Perdue clinics' priorities

By LULADEY B. TADESSE and RACHAEL JACKSON, *The News Journal*

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About a year ago, Brenda, 26, arrived to a regular workday at the Perdue Farms processing plant in Georgetown feeling fine.

But, as she worked, opening up chickens and removing their insides, she started to feel ill. She raced to the bathroom, vomited, and then went to the processing plant's health center. The medical staff there gave her medicine and "a little Pepto-Bismol" and told her to go back to work, not home.

"Then they'd be missing someone," Brenda, an undocumented resident, said they told her. "So I had to stay."

Brenda, like most nonunionized workers at Perdue, uses an on-site Wellness Center staffed by doctors contracted by Perdue. The company promotes its centers because workers can visit them while they're on the clock, pay low fees for services and not have to worry about transportation to appointments.

But some of the workers and their advocates say the centers present a potential conflict. The same doctors taking care of the workers' private, ongoing medical needs also are in charge of treating them for work-related injuries on behalf of Perdue.

"Are these doctors working truly independent of the company?" asked Jennifer Ng'andu, senior health policy analyst at the National Council for La Raza, an advocacy group for Hispanics, based in Washington, D.C. "You need to have the medical system be independent of the company if the providers are making judgments about the workers' ability to carry out their work responsibilities or job duties."

Perdue began offering on-site medical care for its workers in Georgetown in 1998. A year later, it added a similar health clinic in Milford, putting it ahead of a trend of large corporations investing in on-site health clinics to cut medical costs.



Perdue Farms worker Claudia Ortega (right) received treatment for a wrist injury in November 2006 at the company's Milford health care clinic from nurse Tammy Russun.

News Journal file/BOB HERBERT



Poultry workers, such as these in Georgetown, have twice the rate of carpal tunnel syndrome of other workers.

Courtesy of Perdue Farms

California-based Google has five doctors, including a dentist and an allergist, who come on-site. In a recent survey, nearly a quarter of all corporations with 1,000 or more employees ran on-site health care centers.

By providing on-site medical centers, Perdue says it makes health care convenient and cheaper for employees. That's a key concern since the average poultry processing worker in Delaware earns about \$9 a hour, according to the state Department of Labor.

Like at most U.S. poultry processing plants, immigrants are the backbone of Perdue's work force. About 71 percent of Perdue's employees in Georgetown and 65 percent of its Milford plant are immigrants -- mainly from Central America. Many of these workers don't speak English, have very little formal education -- even in Spanish -- and often don't have a primary care physician. About 80 percent of the workers at Perdue use the clinics as their main source of primary care, Perdue officials said.



Soledad Sullivan says Perdue's care is cheaper than her husband's employer.

Divided opinions

Perdue employees have mixed opinions on the medical services.

Roberto Varbosa, 41, of Lincoln, who is diabetic, said he sees the on-site doctor at Perdue regularly and has been very happy with the care.

Soledad Sullivan, 48, of Dover, who trains new hires, said the clinic helped her through a hysterectomy.

Her husband and son also use the clinic. She said Perdue's health plan is less expensive than the one offered by her husband's employer.

But many, including Brenda, a mother of two from Guatemala, say they like their employer and are pleased with their wages but question the priorities of the company nurse and contracted doctors. Because of her illegal immigration status, she asked that her last name not be used.

A day after she was treated in the Wellness Center and sent back to the processing line, Brenda stayed home, missing a day's pay to recover from what she thought was probably some sort of food poisoning.

In the \$42.5 billion U.S. poultry industry, injury rates and worker turnover are higher than in other manufacturing industries. There also is pressure to keep the production line running by quickly patching up workers and sending them back to the line, worker advocates say. And mingling health care and on-the-job injury information leaves workers

vulnerable in a potential workers' compensation suit, those advocates say.

Workers seeking medical care outside these clinics are penalized financially and don't get paid for the time they spend seeing outside doctors. But if they agree to be treated on-site, the savings are significant: A \$10 co-pay on company time, and preventive care is free.

"It is positive because at least they offer immediate assistance on site, and the patients will not have to miss work to go to the doctor if it is a minor problem," said Dr. Fabricio Alarcon, medical director of La Red Health Center, a federally funded community-based health provider assisting Hispanics in Georgetown.

He said poultry workers who aren't granted any paid sick time off often have to decide whether to go to a doctor and lose a day's wage. Delaying a doctor's visit could result in more serious health problems.

'Scratch below the surface'

While poultry workers and their advocates appreciate the benefits of on-site clinics, they aren't convinced workers always receive the best care.

"It sounds like a good thing until you scratch below the surface," said Carole Morison, who heads the Delmarva Poultry Justice Alliance, an advocacy group representing poultry workers. "The company says they are going to reduce health care costs, which is always a good thing, but the method is always questionable whether the workers are getting the treatment they need and if they are being treated fairly."

Some workers question whether the doctors and nurses have their best interest in mind or simply want to prescribe a quick fix and make them go back to work. Many view these doctors as "company docs."

Pedro Vasquez, 28, a former bodyguard in Guatemala who now works in the distribution center of the Georgetown plant, said his hand has been bothering him, but he doesn't have much confidence in the Wellness Center to treat him.

"It's always the same," he said. "A pill and back to your work again."

Ultimately, it is the worker's decision, said Julie DeYoung, spokeswoman for Perdue.

"If they would be unsafe either to themselves or others, we would of course send them home," DeYoung said. "Even if we say, 'Go back to work,' and the person feels like they don't want to go back to work, we don't force them. It's their decision to go back to work."

Julie Eisenberg of Research Associates of America, a Washington, D.C.-based group that does research on behalf of unions, questioned the priorities of on-site health clinics. Her group studied the largest pork processing facility in the world, a Smithfield Foods plant in

Tar Heel, N.C.

Workers who use a clinic managed by a third party, Chadds Ford, Pa.-based CHD Meridian Healthcare, told researchers that doctors at the clinic misdiagnosed injuries and refused to give referrals for follow-up care. Employees also reported fears of being fired if they complained of injuries.

"We see it as a crisis, an absolute crisis," Eisenberg said.

Dennis Pittman, spokesman at Smithfield, disputed the study's conclusions, saying employees have been happy with the program, and that it hasn't even saved his company much money.

"I think they pretty much have just taken statistics and tried to paint them in a way that just tells the story they want to tell," he said.

Injury rates high

Poultry processing plants have among the highest rate of injuries of manufacturing workers, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The work is physically demanding and turnover rates are high.

Poultry workers spend most of their time standing by a conveyor belt, cutting pieces of chicken or removing bones with sharp knives and machines at fast speeds. Workers also stand all day and may have pain in their backs or feet. Compared with workers in all U.S. manufacturing industries, meat and poultry workers suffer a higher rate of certain injuries, such as chemical burns, amputations, heat burns, tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome, according to a 2005 U.S. Government Accountability Office report on workplace safety.

Poultry processing reported 7.4 recordable nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses per 100 full-time workers compared with 6.3 per 100 workers in all of manufacturing and 4.6 per 100 in private industry as a whole, according to 2005 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Poultry workers reported twice the rate of carpal tunnel syndrome than all other industries combined in 2005.

Perdue said it had 5.62 recordable nonfatal injuries and illnesses per 100 full-time workers companywide in 2005.

Lorraine, 27, an undocumented worker from Guatemala at Perdue's Milford plant, said she and her co-workers spend all day standing up and are often afraid to complain about back pain because of a fear that frequent complaining could jeopardize their jobs. Lorraine asked that her last name not be used.

"If you are an expendable employee, there is always the risk that they are going to put

you back to work when you shouldn't be working because it is in their short-term financial interest to get you back on the line," said Lewis Maltby, president of the National Workrights Institute in Princeton, N.J.

"It's not like they are not easily replaced. If the company doctor sees a chicken worker who is beginning to develop carpal tunnel, it might be easier for the company to fire him than to keep him on the payroll and pay the workers' compensation claim."

Perdue's assembly line workers who get sick during the workday or have a work-related injury must be sick enough to harm themselves or others in order to get an excused absence from work, said Perdue's DeYoung. Depending on the symptoms, they will be told to continue working or get reassignment to light duty -- a job that would not worsen their injury.

David, 27, an undocumented immigrant who asked that his last name not be used, said he complained about back pain and now is not allowed to pick up heavy items. But he keeps working, and earning money.

Workers have a legal right to seek a second opinion, especially following a work-related injury. But workers who see doctors outside the clinic or network pay as much as 50 percent of the co-pay and a \$250 deductible and take unpaid time off. Workers need a referral to see a specialist or doctor outside the clinic.

Perdue said employees have a set number of days they can take off for whatever reason -- illness, vacation, personal time -- as long as they notify the company. Workers who take more than that number of days off face disciplinary action.

"Workers are locked in to see the company doctor," said Jackie Nell, director of occupational safety and health at the United Food and Commercial Workers union, which represents the largest number of poultry workers in the United States. "It's about controlling cost first and foremost, and in the process, what they do is control the workers."

Doctors' dual roles

One of the advantages of a on-site clinic for employers is that it reduces the probability of workers' compensation claims by catching an injury early, treating it, and getting the employee back to work.

But at Perdue, contracted doctors wear two hats: primary care provider and work injury doctor.

"We see that as a pro, not a con, in that the doctor is already established as their trusted health care provider, and we feel they will take better care of them because they know about your health," said DeYoung. "It's more a holistic way to treat a patient. Treating the whole person verses a single organ or body part that may be involved in a work-related injury."

Others see it as a disadvantage for workers.

"I can't imagine any of my clients being comfortable with that arrangement," said Don Marston, a lawyer at Doroshow, Pasquale, Krawitz & Bhaya, which handles workers' compensation cases in Bear.

"Sometimes the employer would call the on-site doctor, such as the doctor at the Chrysler plant, as their expert. Now what they are doing is calling the claimant's doctor as their employers' witness, and that would put the doctor in an untenable situation," Marston said.

Contract doctors subject to a malpractice or liability lawsuit are on their own. Perdue's contract states that it is not involved in providing health care, just administering it.

Morison, of the Poultry Justice Alliance, said few workers in the industry -- particularly the immigrant workers -- pursue litigation because of fear of losing their jobs or being questioned about their immigration status.

What concerns Morison and other workers' advocates more is the mixing of health and work-related injury information.

"The worker does not have to, in applying for a job, tell them everything about their medical history," said the UFCW's Nell. "If you have a worker who is seeing a doctor for personal and workers' compensation, that very well can come up and can be shared by the employer and they could be discriminated against. These privacy issues are big."

For workers such as Brenda, who are afraid to risk deportation, fighting for workers' rights is not an option. If she and her co-workers were legal citizens, Brenda said, "We'd have so many rights."

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PERDUE FARMS INC.

SIZE: Third-largest U.S. poultry producer in sales

EMPLOYEES: 2,931 in Delaware; 22,000 nationwide

ON-SITE WELLNESS CENTERS: two in Delaware; 15 nationwide

CHICKENS PROCESSED ANNUALLY IN DELAWARE: 56 million birds in Milford; 45 million birds in Georgetown

ANNUAL SALES: \$3.5 billion

PERDUE'S IMMIGRATION STANCE

Like many employers within the agricultural industry in Sussex County, Perdue relies heavily on an immigrant work force. The company supports federal immigration reform legislation. In March 2006, the company stopped production at its Georgetown plant for a day and allowed workers to travel to the U.S. Capitol in Washington to rally against U.S. House Bill 4437, the Border Protection, Antiterrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005. The legislation proposed making unlawful presence in the United States a felony. It is currently a civil violation. The bill also proposed criminal penalties of up to five years in prison for employers, priests, doctors, social workers or charity volunteers -- anyone who offered assistance to an illegal immigrant