

# Johns Hopkins suspends black lung program after Center-ABC investigation

*IMPACT: Prestigious hospital will review X-ray reading service*

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Johns Hopkins Medicine has suspended its black lung program pending a review in response to a Center for Public Integrity-ABC News investigation revealing how medical opinions from doctors at the prestigious hospital have helped coal companies thwart efforts by ailing mine workers to receive disability benefits.



Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.  
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“Following the news report we are initiating a review of the [black lung X-ray reading] service,” said a statement issued late Friday by Johns Hopkins Medicine. “Until the review is completed, we are suspending the program.”

Hopkins’ decision came as United States senators from coal country announced they have begun working on new legislation to address “troubling concerns” raised in this week’s reports.

“This new report raises a number of troubling concerns,” said a statement from U.S. Sen. Robert P. Casey, D-Pa. Friday. “It is imperative that miners receive fair treatment and are not victimized at any point in the system. I am working closely with Senator (Jay) Rockefeller to develop new legislation to address this problem.”

Rockefeller called the treatment of coal miners a “national disgrace” in an interview with ABC News.

At the center of the program is the work performed by Dr. Paul Wheeler, who heads a unit at Johns Hopkins Hospital where radiologists read X-rays of coal miners seeking black lung benefits. Wheeler found not a single case of severe black lung in the more than 1,500 cases decided since 2000 in which he offered an opinion, a [review](#) by the Center and ABC News found. In recent court testimony, Wheeler said the last time he recalled finding a case of severe black lung — a finding that would automatically qualify a miner for benefits under a special federal program — was in “the 1970’s or the early 80’s.”

Officials with the United Mine Workers, the labor union that represents coal miners, expressed outrage at the Center-ABC News report and called on the federal agency that oversees the nationwide network of doctors who read X-rays in black lung cases to prohibit Wheeler from further involvement in black lung cases.

“Whatever penalties or punitive actions that can be taken with respect to Dr. Wheeler should be,” said Phil Smith, the spokesman for the union. “But whatever they are, they will pale in comparison to the pain and suffering he has caused thousands of afflicted miners. There is no penalty which will make up for that.”

In an interview for the news reports, Wheeler stood by his opinions. “I’ve always staked out the high ground,” Wheeler said.

Earlier Friday, Johns Hopkins Medicine posted a statement on its website saying the hospital was “carefully reviewing” the media report and the top-ranked hospital’s black lung unit.

The news report triggered a vocal response from lawmakers and advocates for miners, who expressed outrage at the challenges the coal workers were confronting when trying to obtain the monthly disability payments from their employers.

“This scathing report lays bare for the public something miners and their families in the coal fields have known for decades,” said Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, and a former president of the union’s affiliate, the United Mine Workers. “Even with my years of experience in the mines and as a union leader, knowing full well that coal companies have been cheating miners since the day coal was hand loaded and weighed ... I was sickened and angered” by the report.

“You don’t have to be a doctor at Johns Hopkins to know black lung disease when you see it,” said Trumka, who noted that his father died from the disease.

