

CVS demanding to know how fat workers are

By Christine McConville, Boston Herald

A national data privacy group is seeing red over a new CVS policy that requires workers who use company health insurance to report their weight, and body fat and glucose levels to the insurer – or pay a \$600-a-year penalty.

“This is an incredibly coercive and invasive thing to ask employees to do,” said Patient Privacy Rights founder Dr. Deborah Peel, adding that mounting health care costs have made these policies increasingly common.

“Rising health care costs are killing the economy, and businesses are terrified,” Peel added. “Now, we’re all in this terrible situation where employers are desperate to get rid of workers who have costly health conditions, like obesity and diabetes.”

Rhode Island-based CVS Caremark, which has 200,000 employees, told all workers who use the company insurance plan to have a doctor determine their weight, height, body fat, blood pressure and glucose and fasting lipid levels by May 1.

The company has dubbed the request “a health screening and wellness review so that colleagues know their key health metrics in order to take action to improve their numbers, if necessary.”

CVS says it will pay for the weight, body fat and blood screenings.

But in exchange, workers must sign a form saying the screening is voluntary, and that the insurer can give test results to WebMD Health Services Group. The firm provides health

management programs and benefit support to CVS.

If workers don't sign up, their medical coverage will jump by \$50 a month.

Peel said the \$600 noncompliance penalty shows the program isn't voluntary.

"How is it voluntary if you are a low- or medium- wage person?" she said.

CVS spokesman Michael D'Angelis defended the policy, saying, in an email, "Our benefits program is evolving to help our colleagues take more responsibility for improving their health and managing health-associated costs."

He said CVS bosses won't be able to access workers' personal health records.

"All personal health data is kept private by our wellness program's third party administrator and is never shared with CVS Caremark," D'Angelis said.

Peel said workers should be wary. "There's no chain of custody for health data," she said, "so there's no way to verify that they don't really look at it."

MIT health economics expert Jonathan Gruber said he's not sure where he stands on the effort.

"There is an important line here between a valid method of incentivizing wellness versus discriminating against sick workers, but I'm not sure where that line is," he said.