



- FRONT SECTION
- MARKETPLACE
- MONEY & INVESTING
- TECH CENTER
- PERSONAL JOURNAL
 - NEWS
 - FAVORITES
 - PORTFOLIO



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- In this Section:**
- [Marketplace Extra](#)
 - [Business Fare](#)
 - [Small Business](#)
 - [Marketing/Media](#)
 - [Health & Science](#)
 - [Business Focus](#)
 - [Law](#)
 - [Sports](#)
 - [Who's News](#)
 - [Real Estate](#)
 - [Columnists](#)

- [Weekend Journal.](#)
- [Special Reports](#)
- [Journal Links](#)

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- [Business Update](#)
 - [Markets Recap](#)
 - [WSJ on Audible](#)
 - [Learn More](#)

- Journal Atlas:**
- [Table of Contents](#)
 - [Headlines](#)
 - [Business Index](#)
 - [Search](#)
 - [News Search](#)
 - [Past Editions](#)
 - [Briefing Books](#)
 - [Quotes](#)

Centers Offer Medical Imaging To Target Consumers Directly

By **RHONDA L. RUNDLE**
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- "The full body health scan is the best way to show you care for those you love," say advertisements for AmeriScan, a retail medical imaging center at the Scottsdale Fashion Square shopping mall here.

The store, nestled next door to Neiman Marcus, is the brainchild of Craig Bittner, a 34-year-old radiologist who has dreams of opening imaging centers in malls across the country. Patients pay \$960 for a set of scans designed to detect early signs of coronary artery disease or cancers of the lung, colon or kidney. They leave with a written report and a compact disc featuring a colorful tour of the inside of their body.

Dr. Bittner is one of the many entrepreneurs cashing in on the body-imaging boom spurred by consumers' burgeoning appetite for preventive health-care services. While imaging systems -- which cost between \$1 million and \$1.5 million -- have typically been purchased by hospitals and medical centers, recently there has been a surge of companies targeting consumers directly.

HealthScreen America Inc., a four-year-old private company, opened its first retail center 18 months ago in its hometown of Jacksonville, Fla., and hopes to raise \$50 million and go public over the next several years. A new center is set to open in Atlanta by the end of this year, with openings in Boston,

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The red mass indicates a tumor in the left kidney. Bottom left: The blue mass shows the lung and loops of the colon. Above: A moderate amount of calcified plaque inside the aorta can be seen in white. The aorta is centered below the rib cage between the liver (large left mass) and spleen (small right mass).

Philadelphia, South Florida and London sometime next year. In Southern California alone, half a dozen centers with different owners are competing for patients over the radio airwaves in ads that typically feature patients' stories.

Though some medical organizations dismiss full body scans as unnecessary, many baby boomers now reaching their early 50s aren't satisfied with a traditional annual physical exam, which rarely includes expensive high-

tech body imaging.

Margot Eldridge, 56, wanted to get a thorough checkup even though she is in generally good health. "It's kind of nice to be able to take things into our own hands," the Phoenix-area resident said while waiting to be scanned. She took advantage of AmeriScan's 10% off "Mother's Day Special" coupon to shave nearly \$100 off the cost of a full-body test. After her scan and a brief consultation, she left the store with a beaming smile and a clean bill of health.

AmeriScan has emerged as one of the most aggressive of its kind in terms of consumer marketing, spending more than \$30,000 a month to market its Scottsdale store alone. While some scanning centers are in medical office buildings and offer the kind of familiar clinical experience that patients find at a medical laboratory or X-ray center, others, like those of AmeriScan and HealthScreen America, are offering a full-blown consumer service, complete with luxury packages, and lobbies furnished with original artwork and the sounds of chirping birds and waterfalls.

It was only two years ago that Dr. Bittner quit his post as an interventional radiologist at Stanford University in order to launch AmeriScan. He raised \$1.5 million through friends and started scouting malls in affluent neighborhoods. He has since raised \$15 million in financing, opened a second center in San Jose, Calif., and is planning to open four more by the end of the year in the Phoenix area, Denver and Seattle. Mall managers who gave him the cold shoulder 18 months ago are now courting him, he says.

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Still, most venture capitalists aren't rushing to finance scanning centers because the broad medical community hasn't endorsed mass screening of the population, and because insurance companies rarely pay for the tests. That limits the consumer market to mostly affluent people willing to fork out hundreds of dollars or more out of their own pockets. And if the scan finds something unusual, patients must still take results to their regular doctor.

What's more, established medical organizations tend to frown on body scanning as costly and unproven. The American College of Radiology, for example, issued a statement in November stating that it "does not believe there is sufficient scientific evidence to justify recommending total body CT screening for patients with no symptoms or family history suggesting disease." The group worries, in its statement, that such screening "will lead to the discovery of numerous findings that will not ultimately affect patients' health, but will result in increased patient anxiety, unnecessary follow-up examinations and treatments and wasted expense."

Other critics fear the scans could give patients a false sense of security about their health because they can't detect every indication of disease. And although scans are performed differently from center to center, most scans cover from the neck through the pelvic region. They generally don't include the head unless the customer opts to include a head scan, which cost an additional \$200 at AmeriScan. And to look for a disease such as colon cancer, a patient must ask for a separate test called the "virtual colonoscopy," a noninvasive AmeriScan procedure that costs \$895, but lacks some of the unpleasantness of the real thing. Both procedures can be purchased together in a package for \$1420.

Those who received a clean bill of health tout their peace of mind. The relatively few that got bad news say the early warning may have saved their lives. Helen Bain, a 53-year-old former elementary school teacher in Los Angeles, says she volunteered to do a commercial for a company called Heart Check America after she was tested for coronary artery disease last October. Her scan identified a partial blockage in one artery, which was successfully treated. "I was lucky I didn't have a heart attack," she says. In exchange for her testimonial, she received a free scan for her husband.

Heart Check America opened its doors over a decade ago to perform coronary artery scans. In July 1999, a landmark article published in the *Lancet*, a respected British medical journal, showed the effectiveness of computed tomography (CT) scanning for early detection of lung cancer. "That kind of broke the dam and we started doing lung scans," as well as body scans and other diagnostic tests, says Bruce Friedman, president and co-owner of Los Angeles-based Heart Check America, which operates centers in Southern California, Illinois and Pittsburgh.

The same research triggered inquiries to university medical centers that perform diagnostic imaging tests with a physician's referral. At Stanford, the phones started ringing off the hook, recalls Dr. Bittner, who was working there at the time. He says he heard a technologist repeatedly turning away potential customers, which gave him the idea for a chain of consumer imaging centers. "I wanted to take the scariness away by creating a warm, nurturing place next door to Haagen Dazs," he says.

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