



TECHNICAL UPDATE

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PRIORITIZING NEEDLE SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE

Needle stick injuries remain one of the most significant risks to healthcare and public health workers, particularly those in settings where routine vaccinations, medical procedures, and emergency services are performed. These injuries can expose workers to severe infections, including hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and HIV. For county employees working in health departments, correctional facilities, and other public health-related environments, the risk is not only to their health but also to workplace safety. A recent incident in one of our counties highlights the importance of strict adherence to safe handling protocols and the role of constant awareness in preventing injuries.

REAL COUNTY INCIDENT: A WAKE-UP CALL FOR VIGILANCE

Recently, a nurse in a public health department sustained a needle stick injury while administering vaccines. Following standard vaccination procedures, the nurse placed an uncapped, used syringe on the vaccine tray after administering a dose. When reaching back to dispose of the syringe, the nurse accidentally punctured her fingertip. Although all necessary post-exposure protocols were followed, the incident is a stark reminder of the potential consequences of even a momentary lapse in needle safety.

While the nurse fortunately avoided a serious infection, this incident emphasizes the importance of continuous adherence to safe needle handling and disposal procedures. The steps to reduce these risks must be integrated into daily practices and reinforced through training and support, as the health and safety of our public service workers depend on it.

BEST PRACTICES FOR SAFETY AND PREVENTION

To reduce the incidence of needle stick injuries, healthcare facilities and public health departments should ensure that all employees are trained in and follow best practices for needle safety:

- 1. Implement Proper Disposal:** Used syringes should be disposed of immediately in a designated sharps container. To prevent accidents, avoid placing uncapped syringes on surfaces.
- 2. Use Safety-Engineered Needles:** Select syringes and needles with built-in safety features, such as retractable needles or sliding sheaths, which automatically cover the needle after use.
- 3. Avoid Recapping Needles:** Recapping needles is one of the leading causes of needle stick injuries. Instead, adopt a practice of disposing of needles immediately to eliminate the need for recapping.
- 4. Encourage Reporting and Follow-Up:** Prompt reporting and treatment are crucial following any needle stick injury. Employees should feel encouraged to report incidents without fear of blame or repercussions so that timely medical support can be provided.

FOSTERING A SAFETY CULTURE

Creating a culture of safety within county health departments and other public health facilities is essential to sustaining these best practices. Employees need regular training and should be encouraged to remind each other of safe practices. Supervisors should lead by example, demonstrating consistent adherence to needle safety protocols. Safety reminders in high-risk areas, like procedure rooms and vaccination clinics, can also help maintain awareness.

IMPROVEMENT THROUGH INCIDENT REVIEWS

Each needle stick incident should be reviewed thoroughly to understand the cause and to prevent future occurrences. For example, in the recent case, examining whether a sharps container was immediately accessible or if specific workflow changes could reduce the handling of uncapped needles may reveal valuable insights. Additionally, employees who experience needle sticks should have access to emotional support and counseling if needed to help address any stress or anxiety associated with the incident.



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COUNTIES

Needle stick injuries are preventable only when every employee remains vigilant and adheres to established safety protocols. The county example serves as a reminder of the importance of these procedures in protecting our workforce from potentially serious health risks. By staying committed to safe needle-handling practices, counties can ensure a safer work environment for everyone, reduce health risks, and foster a proactive safety culture that ultimately benefits all employees and the community they serve. For questions, contact CTSI at (303) 861-0507.