Should Medical Staff Still Be Tracked to Protect Patients Against Hepatitis C?

UPDATE: New Hampshire senators blocked efforts to end a registry of traveling medical technicians, citing patient safety and hepatitis C concerns.

May 5, 2022 By Trent Straube

UPDATE: The below article was originally published April 14. Since then, New Hampshire senators have effectively blocked efforts to end the required registration of medical technicians, reports The Associated Press.

Here's the original article:

New Hampshire lawmakers are pondering whether to continue keeping a registry that tracks medical technicians, reports The Associated Press. A 2014 law established the registry after a traveling lab technician at Exeter Hospital caused an outbreak of hepatitis C virus, infecting 32 people in New Hampshire, seven in Maryland, six in Kansas and one in Pennsylvania.

Hepatitis refers to inflammation of the liver. When untreated, it can lead to cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, the need for a liver transplant and death.

Ten years ago, traveling medical technician David Kwiatkowski was arrested for infecting at least 46 hospital patients with hepatitis C virus after injecting himself with stolen painkillers and then replacing the medication with saline contaminated with his blood and the hep C virus. He is serving 39 years in prison.

At the time of his arrest in New Hampshire, Kwiatkowski had been fired from several previous jobs because of drug use allegations. But the state had no system in place to track medical technicians like him (doctors and nurses are more closely monitored).

In response to the crisis, lawmakers passed a law to better monitor unlicensed or unregistered health care workers who have access to patients and drugs. The state also created the Board of Registration for Medical Technicians and required hospitals to report disciplinary actions against workers to the board.

Fast-forward to March 2022 and state legislators in the House passed a bill to end the registry. Senators are debating whether to support the measure.

Supporters of the bill to end the registry claim the law is burdensome and creates red tape at a time when health care facilities are experiencing staff shortages. What's more, the board instituted by the law hasn't met in a year.

Critics of the registry also point out that since Kwiatkowski's case first made national headlines, many states have improved their exchange of information with other states and their monitoring of traveling medical technicians.

Other lawmakers and citizens want to keep and improve the existing registry.

"Please do not pass this; this is a terrible idea," Representative Peter Schmidt urged in the AP article. "I think we need to continue to register these medical technicians, otherwise we are opening ourselves up to a potential repeat of the Exeter experience."

Contaminated vials and medical equipment are not the only way hepatitis C virus can be transmitted. According to "Hepatitis C Transmission and Risk," part of Hep's Basics of Hepatitis, hep C is most easily spread through:

- Sharing needles and other equipment (paraphernalia) used to inject drugs
- Blood transfusions and organ transplants before July 1992
- Sexual contact with someone who has hep C
- Having a mother who had hep C when you were born.

Hepatitis can be caused by several factors, including toxins, excess alcohol use, autoimmune diseases, fat in the liver and viruses, including the three most common ones: hepatitis A, B and C.

The most common hepatitis viruses are spread via contaminated food and water (hepatitis A) and shared needles and sex (hepatitis B and C). Transmission via blood transfusion is now very rare. Folks living with HIV are at higher risk for coinfection with viral hepatitis. Effective vaccines are available for hep A and B. In addition, hep C is curable in most cases (but not HIV and hep B).

It's estimated that 2.4 million Americans were living with chronic hep C between 2013 and 2016 (about 1% of the adult population), according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. What's more, 14,242 people died of hepatitis C in 2019, and acute hep C cases quadrupled from 2009 to 2019, in part fueled by the opioid epidemic and the related rise of injection drug use.

To read a collection of articles on the virus, click #Hepatitis C.

In related news, see the 2019 article, “Medical Tech Who Transmitted HCV to Dozens Is Denied Vacated Sentence.”

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