Don’t Rush, Pay Attention and Stay Calm to Avoid Needlestick Injuries

May 20, 2003 - Every year, there are between 400,000 and 800,000 injuries to health-care workers in the United States caused by sharps, the needles, scalpels and other devices used in patient care. Due to hazards from hepatitis and HIV, these minor injuries can set off an expensive chain of events that only adds to the health care burden facing doctors and hospitals. In a study published in the current issue of *The American Journal of Medicine*, researchers from Canada and the United States found that workers who are rushed, distracted, or angry are more likely to be injured.

In an accompanying editorial, Dr. David Oldach asks, “Who would disagree with the finding that rushing, anger, and distractedness are associated with needlestick injuries?” He continues, “They are associated with almost any mishap.” However, he believes that until we are confronted with the true costs, we often fail to solve such problems.

Subjects were 139 health care workers employed at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore, Maryland, or at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Participating subjects were interviewed by telephone using a standardized questionnaire to assess rushing, distraction, anger, fatigue, performance of a task in an emergency situation, and teaching. For workers outside of an operating room, factors such as repeated attempts to perform procedures, staffing shortages, and the presence of an uncooperative patient were also evaluated. Subjects who were in an operating room at the time of injury were asked about the presence of a bloody operative field, excess noise, and the performance of highly complex procedures. Trainees were asked whether or not they were being taught at the time of the injury.

In the study, Dr. David Fisman points out that “Distractions were often trivial in nature, an observation supported by the finding that emergency situations did not increase the risk of sharps-related injuries. Anger was most often associated with conflict with another employee or with a patient. This suggests that worker education on the importance of not disturbing colleagues working with sharp devices, and on the importance of ‘cooling off’ after an interpersonal conflict before attempting a procedure, could help to
prevent future sharps-related injuries.” Lead investigator Dr. Murray Mittleman of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston notes, “Although some of our findings appear to be intuitively obvious, careful documentation with appropriate control data is required to clearly identify worker and workplace factors that can be altered to prevent these injuries.”

In the editorial, Dr. Oldach recalls the teachings of Sir William Osler, who in 1889 recommended _aequanimitas_ – imperturbable calmness in the face of conflict and suffering – as the pinnacle of medical professionalism. Dr. Oldach observes that maintaining _aequanimitas_ in the face of ever present distraction and overloaded schedules (particularly in this age of multitasking) is a consistent challenge. It is something we all need to think about, and we certainly should address these problems in our training programs as well.

The study is reported in “Sharps-Related Injuries in Health Care Workers: A Case-Crossover Study” by David N. Fisman, MD, MPH, Anthony D. Harris, MD, MPH, Gary S. Sorelck, PhD, and Murray A. Mittleman MD, DrPH. The editorial is titled “Rushing, Distraction, and Anger” by David Oldach, MD. Both appear in _The American Journal of Medicine_, Volume 114, Number 8, published by Elsevier.

Full text of the articles mentioned above is available upon request. Contact ajmmedia@elsevier.com to obtain a copy or to schedule an interview.

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