

Infection control

'read out'

Here is an example of an incident in WA.

A 17-year-old fast food worker was pricked in the left forearm by a needle when he was loading a rubbish bag that contained a used syringe into a skip.

It took three months for test results to confirm the teenager had not contracted a disease as a result of the incident. The company was fined \$10,000 and ordered to pay costs of \$20,000.

'ask'

Q. What factors contributed to the incident?

Possible answers: No education on infectious diseases; no procedure on how to deal with disposal of sharps; no safe system of work; no cover on dumpster to prevent unauthorised use; and no instruction to young worker.

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An occupational infectious disease is an infectious disease that can be contracted through work.

Infectious diseases can be contracted from different sources. Some diseases are carried by animals or people, while others are contracted from the environment.

For example, people working with animals may be at risk of Q Fever, Leptospirosis and Anthrax. All workers are at risk of acquiring Hepatitis viruses and HIV.

Some of these diseases can produce long term and life-threatening conditions such as damage to the lungs, liver, heart or immune system. The risk of contracting a disease and the potential harm are increased in some workers such as pregnant women or immune-suppressed people.

With all occupational infectious diseases prevention is better than cure.

Workplace safety and health is everyone's responsibility

Our employer has a duty of care to provide a safe workplace and systems of work, information, instruction and training and an opportunity for workers to consult about occupational safety and health.

In relation to infectious diseases this would include:

- knowing which diseases can be contracted in the workplace; and
- assessing the risk. Once the potential diseases have been identified, employers must assess the risk of the diseases being transmitted to workers.

The risk assessment should consider the following factors:

- How the disease(s) in question can be transmitted
- Current work practices and control measures
- Adequacy of current control measures

If the risk assessment identifies any uncontrolled or inadequately controlled risks, employers must implement control measures to eliminate or reduce the risk

Examples of control measures for infectious diseases include:

- Education and training
- Vaccination for high risk workers (where a suitable vaccine exists)
- Safe work methods – commonly referred to as standard precautions (frequent and thorough hand washing)
- Eliminating or reducing worker exposure to potentially infectious situations
- Use of appropriate protective equipment
- Installing engineering controls such as ventilation systems, or biological safety cabinets

The following control measures may be implemented where there is a risk of needle stick injury:

- Education and training regarding infectious disease risk in the workplace
- Replace plastic bags with containers that can be secured before handling, such as a plastic wheelie bin with a lid. Care should be taken not to introduce another risk, such as creating a manual handling risk by requiring the bins to be emptied by hand.
- Develop work procedures and train workers in safe handling of rubbish
- Train workers in the safe collection and disposal of syringes found outside refuse bags or bins
- Provide and maintain personal protective equipment (PPE) for situations where a risk of needle stick injury has been identified. For example, commercially available PPE such as needle resistant gloves and clothing to minimise syringe penetration.

As individuals we have a responsibility to take reasonable care to ensure our own safety and health and that of others affected by our work. We should be aware of our responsibilities and conscientious use of standard precautions will minimise the risk of acquiring infections and transferring infections between people.

Standard precautions include:

- hand washing after any contamination of hands;
- care of intact normal skin;
- protection of damaged skin by covering with a waterproof dressing or by gloves;
- proper handling and disposal of sharps;
- good hygiene practices to prevent most infections;
- the use of personal protective equipment; and
- containment of all blood and body fluids, i.e. confining spills, splashes and contamination of the environment and workers to the smallest amount possible.

Under occupational safety and health legislation, we also have an obligation to cooperate to help our employer comply with occupational health and safety obligations. We may be required to notify incidents where we may expose (or have potentially exposed) a fellow worker or member of the public to certain diseases, such as HIV or Hepatitis B or C. Notification of such incidents is also subject to privacy and discrimination legislation.

'ask'

Q. Before I finish, is there anything that you can identify that we could be doing better in this workplace to help prevent employees contracting infectious disease?

Take notes about any suggestions...don't panic if there aren't any takers.

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OK, unless anyone has any questions, thanks for listening to me.

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