

NEEDLE

safety at work

UNISON campaigns
to reduce **sharps injuries** for all
working in **health services**

If you would like to know more
about UNISON or wish to join, just call
UNISONdirect on

0845 355 0845

or 0800 0 967 968 (text)

or visit our website

www.unison.org.uk

UNISON

the public service union

DANGER 

What are needlestick injuries?

Health care workers use a range of equipment with sharp edges, points and needles. UNISON is particularly concerned about the number of accidents which involve needles, called needlestick injuries.

Why run a needlestick injury campaign?

Needlestick injuries account for the highest number of accidents to staff in hospitals.

Every year there are more than 100,000 reported needlestick injuries in hospitals throughout the UK.

There are increasing numbers of incidents where UNISON members in the health service are pricked by needles or other sharp instruments which may have been in contact with infected blood or other body fluids. These include anyone from nursing staff injured after giving injections, to cleaners and refuse workers dealing with poorly disposed of needles.

Why are needlestick injuries a problem?

There are more than 20 different pathogens (viruses, bacteria etc.) which have been transmitted from infected patients to workers via needles. Three are particularly hazardous: hepatitis B and C (which can lead to liver disease) and HIV (which can lead on to AIDS).

Are all these injuries an inevitable hazard of the job?

No. The vast majority of needlestick injuries are preventable. Many workplaces maintain high safety standards and have put effective precautions in place to try to avoid injury. But these procedures alone cannot stop needlestick injuries.

The introduction of specially designed safer needles would greatly reduce the current number of injuries. There are increasing numbers of new products which the union believes would help protect our members.

What are safer needles?

The term 'safer needles' is broad and includes those where the needle retracts into the syringe after use, those that have a protective shield over the needle, and some that do not use needles at all. These have reduced injuries dramatically in the USA and would do the same here.

What is UNISON calling for and what has the government done?

UNISON has called for:

- the government and the European Parliament to introduce safer needle legislation
- for the Department of Health and NHS employers to alert employers about the life saving potential of safer needles and to promote their use
- for needle manufacturers to prioritise the production and marketing of safer needles, improve technology and production techniques to reduce cost.

In 2006:

- the European Parliament passed a resolution calling on the European Commission to submit to Parliament legislation calling for the use of devices equipped with safety systems and changes to practices where there is risk of needlestick injuries. UNISON will be working to ensure that this is translated into meaningful legislation with teeth
- the Department of Health published its Code of Practice for the Prevention of Health Care Associated Infections. Among other recommendations it called for the provision of medical devices incorporating sharps protection. UNISON will be looking to the Health Care Commission to enforce this part of the Code through the inspection process
- NHS Logistics, despite strong opposition from UNISON, was sold off to DHL. UNISON is concerned that this could lead to smaller manufacturers with innovative products (such as safer needles) being forced out the market and replaced by bulk purchasing of the cheapest product. UNISON will be monitoring this situation and doing all it can to ensure that DHL stocks safer needles.

How you can help:

- always report needlestick injuries;
- always ensure you dispose of needles and other sharps correctly and safely;
- encourage your employer to start evaluating, and begin implementing safer needles;
- pursue health and safety grievances through the proper procedures where necessary.

This is the first in a number of UNISON publications which will look at the issue of needlestick and sharps injuries.

**For further information call
UNISONdirect on 0845 355 0845**

