LESSONS LEARNED

A health and safety professional sustained a needlestick injury while surveying and cleaning out a laboratory which was vacated when the laboratory group moved into a new building. The laboratory was known to work with chemicals including carcinogens, and biological materials including recombinant DNA and human materials such as cell lines and blood. A variety of items had been left behind in the laboratory after the group vacated the space. Among the many items were chemicals and sharps.

The health and safety professional thought that it would be a good deed to delve through the laboratory and remove the items left behind by the laboratory group, in preparation for renovation of the laboratory space. The individual reported to colleagues that while opening a drawer, a needlestick injury resulted from a needle that was lodged in the drawer.

The health and safety professional, to our knowledge, did not report to the institution’s medical department for evaluation and treatment of the needlestick injury, despite urging from colleagues. The institution has in place a program for assessment, treatment, follow-up and counseling following occupational injuries and exposures such as needlesticks.

There are two lessons to be learned from this event:

1. Laboratory personnel know best what potential risks are present in their laboratory. Health and safety professionals, based on what they have been told by laboratory personnel, can only make an educated guess as to what the potential health hazards are. Thus, health and safety professionals should provide assistance to laboratory personnel but they should not take it upon themselves to clean out laboratory areas. In the event that a laboratory is vacated and it is not possible to obtain assistance from the former occupants, it is important to contact the department or administration that oversees the laboratory. In that case it may then be necessary to obtain the services of a contractor experienced in the cleanout of laboratory facilities.

2. All occupational injuries and exposures, including those incurred by health and safety professionals, need to be reported, evaluated, and treated as necessary.

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