Fear Factor

Stigma leaves a hospital in critical condition

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O Cana-Duh

In Montreal, a touch of northern HIV exposure inspired a chilling hysteria in January. The city's Sainte-Justine's Mother and Child University Hospital announced that an HIVer surgeon, recently deceased, had operated on kids for more than a decade. What's more, hospital administrators claimed to have learned of the surgeon's status only when a fellow doc revealed it.

Ignoring the minimal doc-to-patient transmission risk (below one percent, according to the CDC), Saint-Justine called for immediate HIV tests for the 2,600 affected kids. Alarmed parents threatened lawsuits. "They were upset because the risk [presented by an HIVer doc] could have been avoided," says Jean-Pierre Ménard, a lawyer for the families. Scrambling to name the surgeon, journalists went on a manhunt for a gay male doc. Instead, they uncovered one Maria Di Lorenzo, MD.

The hospital posthumously cleared Di Lorenzo of any wrongdoing, and all tests came back negative. "She was very meticulous during surgery," says Sandeep Mayer, MD, a former colleague. "In my opinion, there was zero percent risk." Indeed, docs are at much greater HIV risk from patients—Di Lorenzo was probably infected during surgery in 1990. She disclosed to a superior soon thereafter. An overseeing committee was established, though the "higher direction of the hospital was unaware of her status until January," according to a hospital spokesperson.

The Quebec College of Physicians has drafted new infectious-disease guidelines, encouraging doc testing and requiring practitioners with medical conditions to consult an expert committee. The guidelines discourage docs from treating themselves, as Di Lorenzo might have done, but do not demand they disclose to patients. Deep breath everyone.

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