No Sharp Shooter

Phlebotomist found double pricking

August 1, 1999 By Belinda Filippelli

Although the risk of contracting HIV from a needle pull is almost nil, former clients of Palo Alto, California, phlebotomist Elaine Giorgi gained new appreciation for biohazard containers in April when her habit of rinsing and reusing syringes went public.

Giorgi's employer, SmithKline Beecham Labs, shot out 3,600 letters to people she may have pricked over the past five years, suggesting they get tested for HIV and hepatitis. SmithKline faces a class-action and several civil suits from patients claiming emotional distress, with one woman alleging that she contracted hep C from the lab.

The only explanation that Giorgi, 52, gave for her rule-breaking recycling was a fear of running out of butterfly needles, the best ones to use on hard-to-pierce veins. SmithKline's spokesperson assured investigators that there was no shortage of spikes.

SmithKline is providing free bloodborne disease testing, but Giorgi's gang has little to worry about, said Stanford University's Andrew Zolopa, MD. Studies show that there is only a 0.3 percent chance of contracting HIV through blood pulls. "We're talking about a very low risk," he said. Nevertheless, news reports that several of Giorgi's subjects were HIV positive "have caused a lot of undue hysteria." The case has thrown a light on California's paltry phlebotomy training requirements—just 10 hours of class and three human punctures. "It's a joke," said private phlebotomy instructor Nina Breinig. "Actually, it's criminal."

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