Positive Test Results Amid HIV and Hepatitis Scare at VA Center

A Georgia veterans medical center alerted nearly 4,600 patients of possible exposure to HIV and hepatitis B and C.

March 3, 2022 By Trent Straube

In early February, the Carl Vinson VA Medical Center in Dublin, Georgia, sent a letter to 4,594 veterans alerting them of possible exposure to infectious diseases including HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C as a result of "discrepancies in reprocessing reusable equipment." Since then, reports WALB.com, patients have tested positive for possible infection.

The news station did not report how many veterans tested positive or whether the diagnoses have been confirmed and definitively linked to the Veterans Affairs facility.

"So people have tested positive so far?" Manuel M. Davila, the medical center's director and CEO, told the news station. "Well, at this point, I don't know the number, but yes. Absolutely."

Hepatitis B and C viruses and HIV can be transmitted through sex, shared needles and improperly sterilized medical equipment. Viral hepatitis attacks the liver, which acts as the body's filter. In fact, hepatitis means "inflammation of the liver." Over time, it can lead to cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, the need for a liver transplant and death. In contrast, HIV attacks the immune system, leaving the body increasingly more vulnerable to infection and disease. Hepatitis C is curable. Although HIV and hep B cannot be cured, treatment is available.

Concerns about possible exposure to the viruses arose when a staff member at the VA facility noticed that all the required steps to clean and sterilize the medical instruments were not being followed, reported WALB.com.

That resulted in a halt of all medical procedures at the center between January 12 and 14.

"When these issues come to light, we stop the line and confront them directly, and we use this opportunity to retrain and create best practices to improve patient safety," Davila said in a

statement that was posted on Facebook. “Accountability remains at the forefront of caring for veterans and it is our goal to correct this issue moving forward.”

The letter dated February 9 and sent to patients possibly exposed described the risk as such:

> Cleaning that is not complete could possibly lead to infection. Dublin VA staff and clinical experts have reviewed the care given to all patients in the last year who had procedures during this time to determine who might have been potentially exposed to any infectious diseases as a result of this. We are confident that the risk of infectious diseases is very low. For your own reassurance, however, you may wish to be tested for infections like hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and HIV. Testing is not required. However, we are making optional testing available to you to alleviate any concerns you may have. VA is providing this testing free of charge. From February 9–25, 2022, we will be setting up dedicated sites for testing to make this as convenient as possible, but testing will continue after that date in our regular laboratory settings so we can ensure every Veteran has the opportunity to be tested.

A similar situation unfolded last summer. For more about that incident, see “Up to 100 Tennessee Patients Warned of Possible Hepatitis and HIV Risk.” To learn more about hepatitis, including testing, treatment and transmission, see Hep magazine’s Introduction to Hepatitis. And for a primer on HIV, see POZ magazine’s Basics on HIV/AIDS.

Nearly 1.2 million people in the United States are living with HIV, compared with the 2.3 million people with chronic hepatitis C and the 862,000 with hep B. These numbers will likely climb, spurred by the opioid crisis and injection drug use.

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