

# SHARPS!

'Sharps' is the term for objects at work that can graze, cut or puncture the skin. Employers must have safe systems of work in place to deal with problems arising from a worker's exposure to sharps. A sharp is anything at work that can cut or deliver a puncture wound. Opened tin cans, broken glass, hypodermic needles and discarded blades are all classic examples of sources of sharps injury.

## Needlestick injuries

Tidy Britain Group surveyed many UK Local Authorities in 2000. There were 226 needlestick injuries due to discarded needles and 60% were to local authority workers. Only half of all local authorities trained street sweepers and provided them equipment to deal with discarded needles, and only 64% of local authorities had an official procedure to recover discarded needles if they were found by members of staff.

## Unhealthy?

Apart from the risk of laceration there is a further risk from a variety of infectious diseases (see also *Daily Hazard No. 62* factsheet on Infectious diseases in the workplace) or poisoning as they are injected directly into the blood stream from the contaminated sharp.

The most likely disease is the often fatal, tetanus (lockjaw). Immunisation is effective but temporary and must be boosted periodically. Hepatitis is contracted from blood contaminated sharps such as hypodermics and clinical waste. The risk of contracting HIV is not so great.

## Those at risk?

A wide range of workers are at risk: people working in medicine, waste disposal, domestic and care assistants, public cleaning, parks and gardens are a few examples. Other workers may not face an obvious risk but must be included. An example being postal workers, the postal workers union, the CWU, found a problem for posties on estates where vandals were setting booby traps on the underside of handrails and banisters with razor blades or needles.

## What does the law say?

There is no specific law on sharps. The diseases associated with sharps are covered by the biological agents

section of COSHH, the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations.

There is a general duty for safe systems of work to be put in place by employers in Section 2 of the Health and Safety of Work Act.

The problem should be risk assessed as required under S 3 of the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations.

## Safe systems of work

Where there is a recognised sharps problem formal safe systems of work (SSOW) should be implemented. Employers are required to consult with Safety Representatives, in good time, BEFORE they implement any SSOW.

## Infection policy

There should be an infection control policy covering prevention of wounds, basic hygiene procedures, containment and disinfection to reduce the risk of contamination with blood and body fluids, and the safe disposal of contaminated waste. The policy should include matters such as:

### Vaccinations

There are vaccinations for many of the common diseases carried on sharps, although not for HIV. Some vaccinations can take place after an incident (tetanus and some forms of hepatitis for instance).

Where there is a clear risk, employers should ensure employees are vaccinated (although there is no direct legal requirement) and that the booster vaccinations are kept up. Any vaccination system put in place should be voluntary and free with employers explaining the need clearly to their employees and promoting it as a sensible precaution.

### Syringes

Syringes which protect workers from puncture wounds by the needle are readily available but are not in common use. Unison has campaigned for their universal introduction which is slowly producing change. The HSE are looking at this issue with the Department of Health, although from a consensus position rather than compulsory one. Employers can, however, buy and use these safer hypodermics.

High pressure air syringes which can be used to push drugs through the skin will hopefully replace the use of needles. However such equipment

doesn't currently perform well enough to penetrate deep under the skin.

### Sharps boxes

Sealed boxes where used hypodermics and other sharps such as blades and broken glass are placed. A system should be in place where they are regularly replaced and the used ones are removed and burned in an incinerator.

### Clinical and other waste separation

Hospitals and some refuse collection agencies, separate different types of waste. In hospitals general waste is systematically separated from waste which might be contaminated with blood or other body fluids. Some local authority waste recycling schemes separate paper and plastics from other waste which may contain sharps. They may also organise special collection of garden or larger domestic waste. These work systems reduce the risk of exposure to sharps.

### Safer work equipment

Waste collection tools such as grippers and or pickers should be used to avoid the need for the hands to be used. The strength of disposal bags and containers should be strong enough to protect against the risk. Where possible, wheeled bins and paladin bins should be used for the storage of waste until collection for disposal rather than just in bags. Bags likely to be used for general waste collection should be of a suitable strength to give some protection against sharps if there is a possibility of them being used for disposal.

### Safer working methods

The way work is done may contribute to the risk of injury from sharps. The GMB recognised this with refuse workers who disposed of plastic sacks. While the sacks appeared strong enough to offer protection if carried, some employees were swinging the bags over their shoulder and receiving sharps injuries when the bag impacted with their body or legs.

### Personal protective equipment (PPE)

In general terms PPE can help protect against the risk of sharps injury but in certain circumstances, such as those with needlestick injuries it may not offer complete protection. GMB found ballistic nylon clothing protected well against cuts but not against all puncture injuries. In construction and manufacturing it may be necessary to have steel soled footwear to protect against possible nail penetration. In other industries it may be necessary to wear leg or body protection against sharps (such as in waste disposal).

### First aid

Under the Health and Safety (First Aid) Regulations, employers are required to assess their first aid needs and ensure adequate numbers of First Aiders are trained and in place with suitable first aid facilities and equipment. Where there are significant risks such as sharps injuries and diseases, First Aiders will need special training in agreed procedures.

### Reporting, recording and reviewing

All sharps incidents should be recorded in the accident book and by any other formal reporting system put in place by the employer. In jobs of high sharps injury risk it is recommended a formal reporting and recording system is put in place. Any instances of disease should also be recorded. This information should be reviewed and acted upon regularly, say at quarterly Safety Committees or at least at annually.

There may be a need for employers to report some of the injuries under RIDDOR (Reporting of Incidents, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrence Regulations).

### Instruction and training

Once a SSOW has been agreed then all parties – including management – need to be instructed in how it is to work and that they are trained to the level of being competent. All staff should be instructed in the importance of reporting all sharps incident so any SSOW can be reviewed and quickly improved.

## Useful contacts:

**Training for Development of Innovative Control Technologies Project (TDICT)** has lots of information on disease prevention from sharps at [www.tdict.org](http://www.tdict.org)

**Hazards magazine's web site** has lots of links on needlesticks at [www.hazards.org/campaigns/needlestickseiu.htm](http://www.hazards.org/campaigns/needlestickseiu.htm)

## Further reading:

### GMB leaflets:

NHS ancillary staff (2.22)  
Refuse collectors (2.30)  
Available GMB Health Safety and Environment Dept.  
Tel: 020 8947 3131

**Unison:** Needlestick injuries in Local Government information sheet. Available Unison Health and Safety Dept.  
Tel: 020 7388 2366