

Risk of Sharps Injuries among Home Care Aides: Results of the Safe Home Care Survey

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This research paper describes a survey that was conducted to help understand whether and under what circumstances home care aides are at risk of injury from sharp medical devices in client homes. The number of home care aides responding to the survey questionnaire was 1,178. The survey was conducted in Massachusetts from September 2012 to April 2013. The researchers found that home care aides responding to the survey had about a 2% risk of receiving a sharps injury for each year of work.

Employers and other Stakeholders

What is the relevance of the research findings?

Home care aides are performing more complex medical care tasks within client homes. Home care aides may at times have clients with a health condition that requires the use of sharp medical devices (called sharps) in their home to puncture their skin. Examples of sharps include lancets for diabetic blood testing as well as hypodermic needles for injections, IV infusion and dialysis treatment.

The presence of sharps in a client home increases the likelihood that a home care aide will experience a sharps injury. A sharps injury from a previously used sharp exposes the home care aide to bloodborne pathogens which can cause a serious infectious disease, such as (but not limited to) HIV/AIDS, and Hepatitis B and C.

The risk of a sharps injury is significantly increased if the home care aide:

- Assists a client with the use of the sharps device
- Works in a client home where sharps are not properly disposed of in a safety container
- Works with a client who behaves aggressively

Intervention Opportunities

Employers can reduce the safety and health risks associated with exposure to occupational hazards through hazard recognition and control training - for example at orientation or in-service training opportunities. In addition, employers and their referral networks can screen clients' homes at in-take and regular assessments for the presence of hazards and determine best ways to manage them.

Increased education and awareness of sharps injury risk among clients and client family members also reduces the potential for a sharps injury among your workforce. Strong advocacy for the development and prescribing of needle-less systems or sharps with safety features is another important way to ultimately eliminate exposure to sharps. Employers can also support home care aides with an effective "lone worker program" to provide continuity of contact in the event of an emergency.

Home Care Aides and their Advocates

Here are some steps that home care aides can take to protect themselves from sharps hazards in clients' homes:

- Use universal precautions to protect from exposure to potential infectious agents in body fluids or waste
- Find out how sharp medical devices are disposed in the home If the client uses them
- Do not assist clients with using sharps unless qualified by proper training
- Move away from the client if the client becomes violent or abusive. Then contact the employer and follow the procedure the employer has in place