

Estates and Facilities Alert

Action

Ref: Ref: EFA/2013/001 Issued: 21st January 2013
Gateway Reference: 18655.

Device

Sharps and sharps containers transported in staff vehicles

Problem

Exposed or inadequately protected sharps left in healthcare staff vehicles put occupants and service personnel at risk of needlestick injury.

Action

Safe systems of working should be developed by healthcare organisations and followed by clinical staff who travel in the community and carry sharps.

Action by

Health & Safety Managers
Clinical Governance
Community health workers

Contact

Enquiries about specific lease car contract arrangements should be directed to the relevant supplier.

Problem

1. The Health and Safety Executive¹ is concerned about needlestick injuries reported by a car leasing company which employs servicing and valeting personnel. The injuries were caused by used, loose and unprotected hypodermic needles (sharps) left in lease or ex-lease vehicles used by clinical staff.
2. The reported incidents highlight that passengers and drivers are also at risk. Clinical staff may use their own private vehicle at work, so the problem is not limited to lease vehicles.
3. Sharps have been found underneath and down the backs and sides of seats as well as in carpets, boot spaces and spare wheel wells. It is suspected that these situations arose as a result of failure to clear up properly after spills from un-secured sharps containers.
4. In addition, an incident has been notified in which a vehicle repairer found a mass of debris including sharps when repairing a car that had been involved in a collision. Consequently, tidying a car only before a planned service, etc. cannot be considered as adequate risk control.
5. The risks to health following a needle stick injury are widely known, fully documented (see Additional Information) and include the emotional effects of the treatment regime and waiting for the results of tests for infectious diseases.
6. Healthcare organisations are responsible for setting safe systems of working and healthcare staff are responsible for following them. Failing to take adequate precautions to protect oneself and others from the risk of needlestick injury is potentially both a disciplinary issue and a criminal offence under health and safety legislation.

Action

7. This notice should be brought to the attention of all appropriate managers and staff, including allied health professionals.
8. Healthcare staff who travel in the community and carry sharps (used or unused) in the course of their work should follow a safe system of working **at all times**, in line with their local clinical and waste disposal policies. Sharps should always be stored safely and securely.
9. Staff should ensure that they
 - a) dispose of sharps immediately after use in a container suitable for transport², close the lid immediately after use and secure the container in the vehicle to avoid tipping;
 - b) follow instructions for the assembly and use of sharps containers, including the use of lid closing and locking mechanisms;
 - c) report any lid closing and locking mechanisms problems so that the suitability of the container can be reviewed²;
 - d) check the container at the end of each shift to ensure no sharps have been dropped or spilled in the vehicle. If sharps have been spilled, do not use the affected area and, if necessary, the whole vehicle until made safe;
 - e) report any difficulty following a safe system of working.

10. If staff cannot follow a safe system of working, this should be reported to their manager and additional support and facilities provided, for example placing sharps containers inside a robust secondary carrier or container.
11. Contaminated vehicles should be cleared as soon as possible without compromising safety, e.g. using a torch, a special tool / device to avoid hand contact, and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), being wary of sharps hidden in crevices and fabrics.
12. Healthcare organisations should review their procedures for the provision, use and return of leased cars for staff who travel and carry sharps.
13. Consideration should be given to marking leased vehicles to indicate to service departments that the vehicles are used by staff who carry sharps. This should be agreed with lease / service / valeting companies so that procedures can be set up to deal with vehicles received at any site. For security reasons, such a mark should not be identifiable from outside the vehicle during normal use.
14. If seats or other fittings require to be removed to complete checks properly, the service department must be told the reason for the work and the precautions required.
15. Healthcare organisations should work with staff who use their own vehicles to ensure the same standard of risk control.

Suggested Onward Distribution

- Health & Safety
- Clinical Governance
- Estates & Facilities
- Supplies/Procurement
- Community Care
- District Nursing
- Infection Control Staff

Contacts

Enquiries about specific lease car contract arrangements should be directed to the relevant supplier or administrator.

References

- 1 HSE Resources Page on sharps injuries:
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/healthservices/needlesticks/resources.htm>
- 2 BS 7320 *Specification for sharps containers*, 1990
(see also United Nations Standard UN 3291)

Additional information for England

The above sections of this Alert were compiled by the Health Facilities Scotland and distributed nationally without modification

Action required by this alert should be **underway by: 20th February 2013**

Action required by this alert should be **completed by: 22nd May 2013**

Enquires should quote reference number EFA/2013/ 001 and be addressed to:

Defects & Failures

Department of Health

NHS Estates & Facilities Policy Division 2W59

Quarry House,

Quarry Hill,

Leeds LS2 7UE

Mb-defects&failures@dh.gsi.gov.uk

HOW TO REPORT DEFECTS & FAILURES

Defects and failures relating to non-medical equipment, plant and buildings should be reported to the Department as soon as possible. Advice on how to report can be found in **DH/2012/001** Defect and failure reporting is an on-line reporting facility, available on the NHS Information Centre website at www.ic.nhs.uk

© Crown Copyright 2012

Addressees may take copies for distribution within their own organisations