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## Hidden Dangers Lurking in Your Medical Office, Part II

Be on the lookout to protect your patients

By Daniel Casciato

*This is Part II of a two-part story. Part I covered environmental hazards and poor air quality.*

Some dangers in the medical office are more obvious than others. The top five include: environmental hazards; germs and infections; poor air quality; personal/interaction conflict; and hazardous materials.

### Germs and Infections

The presence of health threatening microorganisms in a medical office presents a serious issue for both patients and the medical staff. Usually patients are individuals with weakened or otherwise compromised immune systems. As a result, they are very prone to infections.

"Acquiring these infections from a medical office will result in both additional pain for the patient and additional financial burden on the healthcare system," says Dr. Andy Kielbania, chief scientist for the Newark, N.J.-based BioNeutral Group, which recently filed for EPA approval for its disinfectant and sterilant for use in healthcare. "It has been estimated that anywhere from \$15,000 to \$50,000 additional money is required to cure a patient, for example, from a hospital-acquired infection. In addition, thousands of these individuals do not survive these acquired infections because these health threatening microorganisms have developed a resistance to essentially all antibiotics."

One reason for the spread of germs and infections is because hand sanitizers used by many medical staff are not sufficient to control these health threatening microorganisms.

"These antibiotic resistant organisms have recently been referred to as super bugs," explains Kielbania. "Many of the commonly used disinfectants are not sufficient robust to eliminate these super bugs."

Kielbania contends that there are several problems with the alcohol hand washes and alcohol gels present in almost every medical office used

"First, the alcohol rapidly evaporates when used and disappears in seconds," he says. "As a result there has not been sufficient contact time with the germ to eradicate it. As a result the medical staff thinking they have cleaned their hands after dealing with an infected patient in actuality have hands contaminated with the previous patients germs and will transmit those germs to the next patient, putting this next patient at risk for an infection."

Keeping hands and surfaces clean by following the proper cleaning and disinfecting procedures is an important first step to maintain a safe, germ free medical environment.

"Using the proper disinfectants is also important and these steps should not impose undue costs—considering the \$15,000 to \$50,000 required to treat a hospital acquired infection, for example," Kielbania adds.

### Personal/Interaction Conflicts

Dealing with patients is not often thought of as dangerous, but Obertots warns that escalating conflict can sometimes lead to an angry patient sabotaging your office.

"Your medical staff need to be trained in conflict resolution or managing patients because that will eliminate the dangers on both sides," he says. "Patients are waiting in the lobby, sometimes becoming agitated or frustrated, or growing impatient. Others may be complaining about billing or insurance issues. To avoid a personal act of hostility which could escalate to absolute violence of the worst nature, some kind of serious standards and training dealing with conflict management or hostility is essential nowadays."

Conflict resolution training can decrease the possibility of something getting out of hand where it turns into physical or structural damage.

"You do have to figure out how to preempt it but also how to keep managing it and improving it," says Obertots. "Coaching or role playing with an expert is important."

### Hazardous Materials

Managing hazardous materials and fluids are also critical to maintaining a safe working environment.

Ernie Gates, president of Gates Healthcare Associates in Middleton, Mass., recommends that your office should be designed so that patients will have limited access to where any medical treatments are being performed.



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"Smaller medical offices have a lobby area where the patients are too close to the exam rooms," he says. "Not only do you want to keep the exam rooms away from other patients for privacy concerns, but also to keep them from getting too close to hazardous materials."

Obertots recommends having a safety or environmental services expert come in and examine your medical space thoroughly and objectively.

"Have this person spend a day watching your practice and procedures to see how you maintain your environment, medical instruments, and the cleaning of your contact points like chairs and other surfaces," he says. "They'll probably see things you don't usually notice, particularly sterility issues. These are occult dangers—they are lurking or are invisible; the eye can't see what's on the surface or what is radioactive. If there are any dangers embedded in your practice of which you are not aware, they'll find it."

### **Perform an audit**

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Obertots suggests that an entire comprehensive audit of your medical office for any potential danger would be beneficial.

"Your office may have been doing things because it's how it was always done and you just aren't aware of it," he says. "Also, with people being busy, overwhelmed, and overworked, many of these things are neglected, but these are problems that can create bad outcomes. You need an objective audit or inspection of your office. If you have a good system you reduce the dangers to everyone."

Gates agrees: "Someone needs to come in on a regular basis to see what quality improvements need to be made to prevent some potential errors. If there is an error and it is claimed and it's found that your office didn't use the right preventative measures, it can affect your medical malpractice insurance."

Gates add that showing documentation that continued quality improvement is part of the medical practice will help in any medical malpractice issues.

Finally, Obertots stresses the importance of a business continuity plan in the event that a disaster deactivates your facility for a period of time. What happens if your medical practice is shut down for a few days because of mold? Or if there's water damage from a flood or a fire destroys part of the office building?

"Don't be so brazen that you don't think something won't happen," he says. "It could be something as simple as mold that forces you to relocate for a few days. And, you may be in an area where appropriate and affordable capacity is so scarce and you have to relocate many miles away or to an entirely new part of your city."

If you have a good plan, you and your staff will be better prepared in case a situation like this arises. Know how and where you are going and also make sure that you have your medical data backed-up at an off-site location.