



CONSENSUS STATEMENT

Preventing needlestick injuries in the healthcare workplace

This Consensus Statement reflects the position of the Australian Infection Control Association, Medical Technology Association of Australia, the Australian Nursing Federation, the Royal College of Nursing Australia, the Royal College of Pathologists Australasia and independent experts in relation to a national call to action for the prevention of needlestick injuries in the healthcare workplace.

The provision of a safe and healthy working environment is a fundamental right of every employee in Australia. The duty of care provisions within occupational health and safety legislation aim to protect persons from all types of hazards and risks arising from work activities. Therefore it is reasonable to expect that healthcare employees in Australia should be protected from the hazard of occupational exposure to bloodborne pathogens from needlestick and sharp object injuries and the subsequent risk of acquiring a potentially life threatening bloodborne disease such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C or HIV/AIDS.

In Australia, it has been estimated that at least 18,000 nurses and other healthcare employees suffer needlestick and sharp object injuries every year¹. Numerous studies have shown that approximately 50% of needlestick injuries are not reported, with rates of underreporting ranging from 40% to 80%². *Therefore the actual number of injuries to healthcare professionals is likely to be in excess of 30,000 per year.*

A recent report published by the Office of the Australian Safety and Compensation Council found that needlesticks and other sharps are identified as high risk occupational hazards by 43.5% of nurses. The report shows that 1 in 9 nurses had at least one needlestick or other sharps injury in the past 12 months³.

Needlestick and other sharp object injuries generate significant cost for the Australian healthcare system and can result in great stress for the injured healthcare workers and their families.⁴

Independent studies show that the majority of needlestick injuries are preventable through the implementation and use of safety engineered medical devices (SEMD) combined with relevant education and training programs for healthcare employees.⁵⁻⁹

Unlike many countries, Australia has yet to adopt a nationally consistent approach to the use of SEMD in healthcare settings either through prescriptive legislation or policy. Guidelines, awareness and education campaigns and other non-legislative initiatives alone have generally proven ineffective in preventing needlestick injuries to healthcare employees.⁹

Today, many international jurisdictions have taken steps to amend Occupational Health and Safety Legislation and include provision for mandatory use of safety engineered needles and sharps in medical workplaces.¹⁰⁻¹³

Why should healthcare employees in Australia not be afforded the same legislative protection?

The elimination of workplace hazard and risk is a fundamental principle of occupational health and safety legislation in Australia. Every needlestick or sharp object injury at work is a foreseeable hazard faced by healthcare employees in Australia.

All employees in the Australian healthcare sector have the right to work without concern of experiencing a needlestick or sharps injury. The risk of occupational exposure to bloodborne pathogens from such injuries can be and must be eliminated.

The undersigned organisations support the introduction of nationally consistent policy and/or legislation aimed at preventing needlestick injuries in healthcare. Prevention measures must include the implementation and use of safety engineered medical devices combined with relevant training and education.

Safety and quality is central to healthcare in Australia. The safety of all healthcare employees must be viewed as paramount and is everyone's responsibility. Safety for healthcare employees is as important as patient safety.

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