



The "Boys In The Back Room":

Nurses Are STUCK With A Bad Deal

By
**Rebecca
Salome**

Your hospital may kill you. Their weapon is the needle device you handle everyday. Actually you yourself may not be killed on the job, but one of your coworkers will. Somewhere deep inside, you already know this, but maybe you need to be reminded again. Right now, over 150 healthcare workers are dying from HIV/AIDS that they got on the job¹. Shall we go on? Every year 18,000 healthcare workers are infected with Hepatitis B or C from a needlesticks. Between 200 and 300 of them die². These deaths are caused by needlesticks. Period.

On an average day, a needlestick accident is reported every 40 seconds by a healthcare worker somewhere in the United States³. Annually, there are over 1 million reported needlesticks and at least two times that number go unreported⁴. When you walk in the door of your hospital, your administration will hand you a loaded weapon, with which you will play Russian Roulette all day long. Give an injection. Pull the trigger and rotate the barrel. Collect blood. Pull the trigger and rotate the barrel. Dispose of a contaminated needle. Pull the trigger and rotate the barrel. Straighten up your patient's bedclothes. Pull the trigger and POW! You're dead. You didn't see the discarded needle in the sheets.

Maybe you think the risk is too small to matter. Maybe you think it will never happen to you. Or maybe you're a nurse who thinks that taking risks is the price you pay to let your patients know how much you care. There's nothing honorable about being a healthcare martyr, especially when it is unnecessary.

A dangerous, high-stakes game is going on in your hospital. What is the game? Materials management and supplies purchasing. What are the stakes? Profits, what else? Who are the players? The nation's leading needle device manufacturers, your CEO, your purchasing agent, and the group purchasing organization (GPO) your hospital belongs to.

In corporate conventions across the country and in the administrative offices of your hospital, the "boys in the back room" are playing with your lives. These guys are slick. They wear suits and ties and sit behind desks and they toss your lives around like poker chips. How can they get away with it? They know that you are out there on the front lines taking care of people. And they think that you haven't noticed what they're up to.

Nursing has its risks. But contracting a deadly and infectious disease from a needlestick accident is completely avoidable. There is a new disposable safety syringe that prevents you from getting stuck by a contaminated needle. The needle on this new syringe retracts directly from the patient into the barrel where it is permanently locked into place. The automated retraction syringe has no sheathing and requires only one hand to operate. It is 100% risk free. And you can't have it.

Why not? The "boys in the back room" won't let you. They're involved in contracts that prohibit your hospital from buying any products except what the GPO allows. They don't care about your safety.

Eighty percent of the nation's hospitals are members of GPOs that control all of the needle device purchasing⁵. To become a member of a GPO, your hospital pays a membership fee and signs a letter of commitment stating that it will abide by GPO rules. These rules specify what needle products you have access to. Here's a paragraph from the letter of commitment that your hospital's CEO and purchasing department has probably already signed:

Once a group contract or contract category has been announced as included in Premier's Commit-

ted Program members will not contract independently for products in areas covered by these contracts, nor renew or extend existing agreements for such products⁶.

The above paragraph is taken from the Premier Group Purchasing Policy Letter of Commitment. Premier, Inc. is a San Diego-based GPO that controls buying for nearly 1/3 of the nation's hospitals. The term "contract category" would refer to all needles devices. And you should know that in 1996, Premier signed a 7 1/2 year exclusive contract with Becton Dickinson, the nation's largest needle device manufacturer. Lest you think Premier is the only GPO set up this way, you should also know that VHA, another large GPO now reorganized as Novation, signed a similar agreement with Sherwood. It is also significant that the current head of Premier, Mr Robert W. O'Leary used to work for VHA.

The automated retraction syringe isn't manufactured by B-D or Sherwood. It is manufactured by Retractable Technologies, Inc., a new company in Texas. Therefore, your hospital is not allowed to purchase the VanishPoint automated retraction syringe for the next seven years. And Retractable is not the only manufacturer that has been "locked out" out of your hospital. Even though the Punctur-Guard device, offered by Bio-Plexus, can reduce needlesticks by 80 percent during blood collection, Bio-Plexus has been unable to get into more than a few healthcare facilities⁷.

If this article makes it sound like your hospital may be involved in a shady deal with its GPO, you're right, it is. In fact, the deal is probably illegal and is certainly costing healthcare worker's lives. Premier's letter of commitment goes on to spell out exactly how your CEO is involved:

Administration of the Commitment Program will be under the direction and oversight of the Board Purchasing Compliance Committee, composed of chief executive officers of organizations that are share holders in Premier and limited partners in Purchasing Partners, with support from purchasing program management and staff⁸.

This paragraph essentially says that your CEO and your purchasing agent are the police officers charged with making sure that competing manufacturers never get in the door of your hospital. Part of the problem is what your hospital administration has been telling you—that bringing new products into the hospital is a complicated process requiring legal expertise and interpretation of 100-page contracts. You've just read two paragraphs from Premier's letter of commitment. It is only nine pages long and not complicated. But you've been convinced that purchasing is not your job, and you've been depending on the "boys in the back room" to provide you with the safety equipment you need. You should ask yourself why you trust them. They don't ever see patients, they don't use hospital equipment, and their lives are not on the line like yours.

You may think if you serve on a products evaluation committee or participate in a clinical evaluation of new products, you will have a voice. Don't count on it. No matter what you look at and what you approve, if you request a product that is outside your GPO contract, you probably won't get it. That's because the needle devices you get were chosen without your input when your CEO signed the GPO contract behind closed doors.

Something must be done to stop this shocking abuse of power. But it won't be easy. The problem has become a nationwide crisis that reaches far beyond your hospital walls. And a surprising number of outside organizations and agencies are

deeply involved. According to a report in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, both major manufacturing companies and federal bureaus have been less than ethical⁹. Solving the problem will require a national effort, including the active participation of Congress and the U.S. courts system, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Service Employees International Unions (SEIU), the national broadcast media, and healthcare workers like you across the county. Although it is sure to be an uphill battle, there are some signs of hope on the horizon.

If somebody doesn't stop the "boys in the back room," over the next seven years, at least 126,000 healthcare workers will contract Hepatitis B or C from a needlestick.

In March 1998, the Federal Trade Commission confirmed that it will investigate questionable agreements between the nation's two largest GPO's and the two largest needle manufacturers¹⁰. "In April 1998, two reporters from the *Chronicle* exposed some of the parties involved in this "chilling pattern of indifference and neglect within the nation's medical industry" in a three-part, front page story. That same week, nurses and healthcare workers at San Francisco General Hospital rallied on the front steps of their facility in support of Ellen Dayton, the San Francisco RN who contracted HIV/AIDS from a needlestick. Led by local members of the SEIU, SFGH employees demanded that their hospital provide them with equipment to protect their lives on the job.

What steps can you take to guarantee that you are not the next victim in this deadly game?

1. Find out the truth about needlesticks and your chances of getting a life-threatening disease at work.
2. Make sure your hospital knows you are concerned about your safety and that of your co-workers.
3. Demand that our hospital purchase and provide you the safety equipment you request.
4. Seek outside legal counsel in the event of a needlestick accident.

If somebody doesn't stop the "boys in the back room," over the next seven years, at least 126,000 healthcare workers will contract Hepatitis B or C from a needlestick. Of those, 1400 to 2000 will die. Another 420 healthcare employees will get infected with HIV/AIDS, also from a needlestick. You might be one of them. Act now to end this nightmare. Your life may depend on it.

[REBECCA SALOME is a publishing consultant and investigative writer on health and women's issues in Berkeley, California. Since 1994, she has focused on the current crisis in healthcare brought on by the rising risk of infectious disease.]

¹HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, MMWR, Centers for Disease Control, 8 (1), 15, 1996.

²Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1998; International Healthcare Worker Safety Center, 1997.

³*Journal of Healthcare Safety, Compliance & Infection Control*, March 1998, p.111.

⁴Armstrong, S.F. "The Impact of Safer Medical Devices." Reprinted from *Nursing Economics*, 1991 9(6). 426-33.

⁵*Business Week*, March 16, 1998, p.75.

⁶Premier Group Purchasing Policy, 1996, p.4.

⁷*Business Week*, p.75.

⁸*Ibid*, p.76.

⁹Premier, p.5.

¹⁰*San Francisco Chronicle*, April 13-17, 1998.

¹¹*Business Week*, p.76.

SUMMER 1998 ART 1 TEXT

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Synopsis - Your hospital may kill you. Their weapon is the needle device you handle everyday. In corporate conventions across the country and in the administrative offices of your hospital, the " boys in the back room" are playing with your lives.