

Safety Alert

Needlestick Injury to Cleaner

July 2020



Description of the Incident

A cleaner was removing a black general waste bag from a chemical laboratory when she noticed a hypodermic needle protruding approximately 50mm from the bag which had scratched her leg. She was able to contact a member of staff and from the area and confirm that the needle had been used to transfer chemicals (including formalin and calcium hydroxide in solution). Fortunately in this case there was no biological risk from the materials involved and the quantities were negligible. However, similar incidents in other institutions involving chlorinated solvents have led to serious injuries. Several needles had been used during a process in a nearby fume cupboard before being transferred to a sharps container across to the laboratory for disposal. It is believed that one needle had been accidentally dropped into a pile of plastic syringe bodies and paper towels remaining unnoticed until the waste was subsequently disposed of in the general waste stream.

Actions Taken

- The risk assessment was reviewed and found to lack sufficient detail. All members of the research group were reminded that risk assessments should cover the hazards associated with the whole process being undertaken and include enough information to provide an overview of the hazards, who might be put at risk by the work (and how this might occur).
- Small sharps containers were procured by the laboratory manager and placed into each fume cupboard in the laboratory where needles were in use to avoid the need to transfer used needles across the laboratory for disposal

Learning Points

- CoSHH assessments should be cover the entire process including preparation, work-up of reactions and waste disposal. They should consider all possible exposure routes and include anyone who might be at risk not just the researcher.
- Cleaning staff and contractors should be given a local safety induction when working in hazardous areas covering the basics of the hazards present in their working areas, areas they should avoid and what to do in the event of an emergency.
- Safe disposal of sharps is extremely important. Placing small sharps containers in working areas (e.g. fume cupboards) can help to eliminate the need to move sharps across the laboratory for disposal.