



WCB can save lives and money with safety needles, BC health care workers say

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A coalition of BC unions wants the Workers' Compensation Board to mandate the province-wide use of safety needles

BCNU, SEIU, BCGEU, HEU, HSA news release

A coalition of BC unions says the Workers' Compensation Board can protect workers from deadly injuries and save the health care system millions by requiring the use of safety needles and other sharps.

"Each year 6,800 nurses and other health care workers are injured by needles and other sharps in BC acute care facilities," say BC Nurses' Union president Debra McPherson. "Those needless injuries cost our cash-strapped health care system \$13.6 million for testing and preventative treatment. But this isn't just a question of statistics.

"There are real people getting injured and sometimes infected by blood-borne diseases such as HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C. It's devastating for them and their families."

Former Vancouver Hospital RN Julie Savard was accidentally jabbed by a needle while caring for patients earlier this year. Tests confirmed she had contracted the potentially fatal Hepatitis C virus from the unsafe needle provided by her employer. "I'm 100 per cent behind the push for province-wide regulations," says Savard. "If they save even one person from having to live through what I'm experiencing, then they must be implemented now."

In October, the BC Government and Service Employees' Union, BC Nurses' Union, Health Sciences Association, Hospital Employees' Union and the Service Employees International Union presented the WCB with a proposal that, if implemented, will greatly reduce the likelihood of injuries that Savard suffered.

Elton Nordmarken has suffered 13 needle pokes since he began working as a cleaner at Eagle Ridge Hospital in 1991. "Each time I got jabbed I would be given the choice of taking 30 days off on medication till the results came back," says the HEU member. "That plays games with your mind and family life as you are always worried about contracting something. It's hard, and it could all be stopped if employers just spend a few dollars on safe needles."

"These injuries are a threat to every worker across this province and country," says Mike McDonald, president of the SEIU Local 244 in Burnaby. "SEIU has successfully lobbied Manitoba and Saskatchewan to implement these devices. BC workers need the same protection."

As part of the campaign for safer needles, the unions have placed billboards at several Vancouver and Victoria bus shelters. They also produced *Needless Injuries*, a 13-minute video that includes testimonials from injured nurses and demonstrations of safety devices.

BC currently has a patchwork approach to this potentially fatal problem. Some health authorities have introduced policies that protect many, but not all, of their workers. Other jurisdictions have no policy at all, which is why unions are demanding province-wide regulations.

The WCB recently indicated it may consult stakeholders about a possible regulation later this year. The unions welcome the move, but want to ensure the proposed regulations will be fully protective and implemented quickly, so that no other workers like Savard have to suffer needlessly.

"Continuing to allow the use of unsafe needles is as dangerous as permitting cars to be manufactured without seat belts," says McPherson. "That's why we're going to continue campaigning until the WCB mandates province-wide regulations that ensure workers can do their jobs without the fear of being poked by an unsafe needle."

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