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Health and Safety in the Workplace: Safety Instruments Obligatory for Clinics and Doctors' Offices

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MEDICAL REPORT

In areas with "increased risks of infection", the use of safety instruments is obligatory. The transition period expires in July of this year.

As of August 2006, healthcare employees must be better protected from needlestick injuries. For with the amendment to the Technical Rules for Biological Agents – TRBA 250 (*Technischer Regel für Biologische Arbeitsstoffe – TRBA 250*), the use of so-called safety instruments for specific fields of work – mostly unnoticed by the majority of people – has been made mandatory.

A current legal opinion now makes it clear that the new TRBA 250 turns the "should-regulation" into a "must-regulation". It also emphasizes that safety instruments are not only obligatory in hospitals, but in doctors' offices as well. Should a doctor or employer fail to abide by this regulation, they could face monetary fines or even imprisonment for up to three years in the event of an injury and/or claim.

Well over two million employees in the healthcare industry are generally at risk for contracting infections due to the nature of their jobs. This particularly includes the following occupational groups:

- medical doctors
- nursing staff
- rescue and emergency medical services (EMS) personnel
- laboratory staff
- technical staff such as Medical, Biological and Pharmacy Technicians (MTAs/BTAs/PTAs)
- cleaning staff (incl. outside service providers)
- assistant staff (e.g. alternative civil service workers, nursing assistants).

"In hectic everyday work situations, needlestick injuries can happen fast", explains Dr. Sabine Wicker, Head Medical Officer at the Frankfurt University Hospital, referring to a study that surveyed the frequency and causes of needlestick injuries. 720 out of 919 employees took part in a survey at five specialty clinics: this corresponds to a response rate of nearly 80 percent. Based on this study, nearly a third of those surveyed had had at least one needlestick injury within the last twelve months. Among the various occupational groups, doctors were at the highest risk. Throughout the country, approximately 500,000 such injuries occur in German clinics each year.

But how high is the risk that hepatitis B, hepatitis C or HIV could actually be transmitted from a needlestick injury, for example from a used cannula? Statistics show the risk of infection for the various viruses to be:

- 1 : 250 for hepatitis B
- 1 : 6,500 for hepatitis C
- 1 : 650,000 for HIV/AIDS
- As a comparison: the probability of having three correct numbers in the lottery is 1 : 61 and that of having four correct numbers is 1 : 1,032.

In 2004, 2,300 work-related infectious diseases alone were reported to the Employee's Liability Insurance Association for Health and Public Welfare (*Berufsgenossenschaft für Gesundheitsdienst und Wohlfahrtspflege*)



Risky Gamble: The initiative "Safety First" is using this poster to promote protection from needlestick injuries.