Medical Environment Update

Asking the wrong safety questions

Editor's note: *In this guest column,* ***Dan Scungio, MT(ASCP), SLS,*** *laboratory safety officer for multihospital system Sentara Healthcare in Virginia, and otherwise known as "Dan, the Lab Safety Man," discusses the important issues that affect your job every day.*

Many years ago, I was hired to perform a safety audit for a laboratory. As I walked through one department, an employee asked what I was doing. When I remarked that I was looking for safety issues to keep her safe, she asked, "What are you keeping me safe from?" It was the right question. This employee was working in a lab where there were several safety violations and she didn't notice any of them. Was it a lack of education? Was it a product of a poor lab safety culture? Why didn't she see the danger she was in?

More recently, I was performing an audit in a laboratory when the manager was bringing a new employee through during her orientation. I was introduced as the lab safety officer, and I described some of my duties like auditing and safety compliance monitoring. The new employee immediately asked, "What happens if you catch someone not doing what they should?" That was the wrong question.

As an experienced lab safety professional, I often see people fail to follow certain lab safety regulations. You do not have to look far to find such lapses. Vendors, service representatives, and other visitors walk into labs across the country and lab staff ignore them. The visitors are not given information about the hazards in the department and aren't offered PPE. A glance at social media will reveal multiple pictures of lab workers not wearing PPE as well. Oh, and they are taking those pictures with cell phones they shouldn't be using (sometimes the hand holding the phone is gloved, other times it is not). While you should be concerned about these unsafe behaviors, we should be equally concerned about those who witness them and say nothing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised public awareness of an important aspect of personal safety: The unsafe behavior of others also makes you less safe. People who refuse to wear masks or who don't isolate themselves when sick and might create situations where the virus can spread. In the past two years, many people have realized this and have felt empowered to say something to those who are exhibiting unsafe behaviors. The realization of their own potential danger has empowered people to speak up for their safety and that of others around them. Perhaps that is what's needed in the lab setting as well.

Unsafe behaviors in the laboratory have consequences that might affect others in the department. Spills and exposures are just some incidents that may occur. Messy lab areas can create trips or falls. Improper storage of chemicals or hazardous wastes can be dangerous as well. Perhaps laboratory staff don't think enough about the dangerous consequences because there isn't enough training about them. Perhaps they don't think about the potential physical, environmental, or financial consequences to others because they haven't had those consequences pointed out.

When the new lab employee asked the question, "What happens if you catch someone not doing what they should?" I should have had immediately said that she asked the wrong question. The real question is, "What happens to you if you're not doing what you should?" Teaching staff about the consequences of unsafe lab practices should start on day one, with awareness of those consequences raised often and continuously. It is important to correct your own unsafe behaviors, but it is also important to feel empowered to correct unsafe behaviors that you witness. We all have a responsibility for our safety and that of everyone else who may be in the laboratory. If we own that responsibility, then everyone's safety is better assured.

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