HIV scare for thousands of patients

Thousands of patients in Bristol and Bournemouth have been informed they could be infected with HIV or hepatitis because a dentist failed to sterilise his instruments properly.

The patients affected have been sent letters telling them about the potential risk of blood-borne infections after a dentist was found to have been following poor infection control measures.

NHS South Gloucestershire, NHS Bristol and NHS Bournemouth and Poole have said the risk to patients was very low.

Patients are being asked if they wish to attend a special clinic where they can have blood tests for HIV and Hepatitis B and C.

The dentist, a man who has not been named, worked at Frenchay Dental Practice in Bristol between January 2005 and July 2007, and at the East Street Dental Practice in Bristol for two weeks in December 2007.

He moved to another surgery in Bournemouth in January 2008.

The alarm was raised by staff at the Bournemouth surgery where the dentist worked as a locum.

He has been suspended pending an investigation by the General Dental Council.

In Bristol, 5,000 patients, who were treated at the two surgeries while the dentist was there, have been sent letters.

Director of public health at NHS South Gloucestershire, Dr Chris Payne, said that the risk is ‘very very low’ and added that there has never been a documented case in the UK of blood-borne viruses being passed from one patient to another in a dental practice.

In the letter to patients he said that infection ‘can only happen in the rare event that a small amount of infected blood from one person gets into the bloodstream of another patient and the risk of this happening in dental care is very low indeed.’

"Health bosses have refused to name the dentist, who has now retired, or the other surgery in Bournemouth.

NHS Bournemouth and Poole has defended its decision to wait months before alerting patients that they could have been exposed to HIV or hepatitis.

It claimed that it had taken some time to identify patients who were potentially at risk and if it had contacted patients sooner, tests may have missed infections, which can incubate in the body for up to six months.

In another HIV-related case, allegations were made back in April that a dentist had been treating patients in south London despite being HIV positive.

General Dental Council rules mean that the dentist was legally obliged to inform bosses of his illness.

However he failed to do so and continued to work at a clinic in Lewisham where he treated both NHS and private patients.

On being found out, the surgeon, who was immediately told to stop work and was no longer seeing patients.

Lewisham Primary Care Trust said: ‘As soon as we were made aware of allegations about a healthcare professional we took urgent and immediate action. The healthcare professional is no longer seeing patients and we have set up a helpline for patients who may have concerns.’

GDC guidelines for dental professionals stipulate that anyone who believes their own health condition might put patients at risk is advised to ‘take action’. This includes seeking advice from colleagues, professional or defence organisations.

The council advises all dentists to ‘put patients interests first and act to protect them.’

The dentist had been working as a family dentist in Glasgow in 2005 when he was exposed by a tabloid newspaper for posing on a gay sex website. He then moved to south London but failed to inform his bosses he had HIV.

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