Hazardous Drug Exposure in Healthcare

[Name of the Writer]

[Name of the Institution]

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According to a survey conducted by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health or NIOSH, the number of healthcare workers that face the potential risk of exposure to hazardous material exceeds 5.5 million workers. As per a number of studies, workplace exposure is one the most common threats and can affect a person's health in the form of skin rash, adversities in reproductive outcomes and more significantly leukemia (blood cancer) and other forms of cancer. Health workers that are involved in the process of preparation and administration of hazardous drugs or those working in similar environments are at the most risk. These include workers in a pharmacy, nursing and operation room staff. Other personnel at risk include the following;

- General physicians
- Workers in environmental services
- Research laboratory personnel
- Housekeeping
- Workers in shipping and receiving of drugs (Skirton & Patch, 2002)

Organizations that are most suspect to perils of such drugs include large-scale cancer hospitals, university hospitals with oncology units, cancer treatment facilities, ambulatory healthcare facilities and community hospitals. There has been witnessed an increase in the number of ambulatory treatment facilities over the decade in the United States. According to estimates, approximately 1 million patients receive treatment for cancer at these centers. These treatments include procedure such as chemotherapy and radiation therapy. Space constraints in this regard play a major role in increasing the risks of effects of hazardous drugs.

Citing these concerns, NIOSH introduced an awareness program for workers that risk of having the aforementioned diseases. The program was aimed at informing the workers of the perils and dangers they might encounter and how to implement methods that would help in preventing workers from falling prey to these diseases. The recommendations from NIOSH provide insight into the development of a framework that would clarify what drugs can be harmful and the risks associated with them. The criteria for this framework are as below;

- Teratogenicity or developmental toxicity
- Reproductive toxicity
- Carcinogenicity
- Low dose organ toxicity
- Genotoxicity
- Toxicity profile and structure of new drugs that replicate the existing drugs

In order to develop and effective program for prevention of exposure, there needs to be a detail plan or strategy as to what outcome is desired. It is also essential to analyze the risks that are associated with exposure to these drugs. This process can begin by assessing the recommendation that were put forward by the NIOSH and prioritize according to the needs and requirements of the institution of the facility and its operations. For this purpose, a gap analysis would be beneficial in determining the requirements. For the next step, the institute must identify the points that could be potentially contaminated. A risk assessment should also be conducted which would bring to light the various forms of protection that could be employed. The number of staff that could be at risk must also be known. In this process, involving the staff would provide an accurate account of the ground realities that the personnel have to encounter on a daily basis.

It is therefore imperative to train the staff on the methods of prevention and protection in order to successfully implement the procedure. Without support from all departments and individuals, the effectiveness of the process and it implementation would be hampered. As it stands, worker in healthcare face severe risks from the drug that have to prepare or administer on a daily basis. The need of the hour dictates the introduction of a program that would make treatment facilities a safer environment for the workers (Harrington & Estes, 2008).

References

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