



Ready to report: Part I, OSHA

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*Dear Noel,
I have an infection control problem with my employer. I read your infection control column faithfully. I often clip it out and put it on my dentist's desk. Even though you give great information, nothing is changing in our office. I've tried to talk to the dentist directly but he just shrugs and says, "I know." I am concerned for my safety and my patients' safety. I'm afraid that I need to take the next step and report him. Where do I start?*

Signed, Ready to Report

Dear Ready,
I applaud you for making the effort to communicate directly with your employer. Since your concerns have not been addressed, it is your responsibility as a health-care professional to protect yourself and your patients. We are all aware that results of ineffective infection control can lead to life-threatening situations.

Who's at risk?

First of all, you need to determine who is at risk:

- Employee: Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)
- Patients: State licensing agency
- Environment: Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

This column addresses the first of the three groups.

OSHA: Employee's voice

Nearly every working person in the nation comes under OSHA's jurisdiction.

OSHA was developed to assure safety in the workplace. It was established by Congress in 1970 to protect the health of all American workers by establishing safety and health standards, and it ensures workplace compliance through inspections. Working in cooperation with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), OSHA implemented the Bloodborne Pathogen Standard in 1991 to protect health-care workers from occupational exposure to pathogens.

OSHA and its state partners have approximately 2,100 inspectors, plus complaint discrimination investigators, engineers, physicians, educators, standards writers, and other technical and support personnel spread over more than 200 offices throughout the country. This staff establishes protective standards, enforces those standards, and reaches out to employers and employees through technical assistance and consultation programs.

Kelly P. Rowe, OSHA spokesperson, said in a recent personal interview with me, "We want to see more working men and women return to their loved ones at the end of the workday. Prevention is the key. That's why OSHA is your resource for safety and health information. Employers and employees can visit our Web site at www.osha.gov for a wide variety of free tools and information on safe work practices, or call 1-800-321-OSHA to speak to someone who can answer their questions."

OSHA's mission is to assure the

safety and health of America's workers by setting and enforcing standards, providing training, outreach, and education, establishing partnerships, and encouraging continual improvement in workplace safety and health.

The Occupational Safety and Health Act was designed to keep people safe and healthy at work. It gives people rights and representatives for those rights. The agency realizes that participation in the program depends on the employee feeling safe and free to participate at every level.

To help ensure that employees are in fact free to participate in safety and health activities, Section 11(c) of the Act prohibits any person from discharging or in any manner discriminating against an employee because that employee exercised rights under the Act.

These rights include the ability to seek an inspection, file a complaint, and testify about the complaint.

Discrimination includes:

- Firing or laying off, blacklisting, demoting, denying overtime or promotion, disciplining, denial of benefits, failure to hire or rehire, intimidation, reassignment affecting prospects for promotion, reducing pay or hours

OSHA reports are public record. To check for citations on OSHA, go to <http://www.osha.gov/pls/imis/industry.html>. The Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) for dentistry is 8021.

