

Surgical Smoke: Is It Dangerous To Your Health?

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Skeptical Scalpel

An operating room nurse from the UK has asked me to comment on the burning issue of surgical smoke. [Pun intended.] I don't think she's going to like what I have to say.

For several years, studies have found that all kinds of chemicals and organic bits can be found in smoke plumes generated by electrocautery and lasers in the operating room. Some of the chemicals are said to be carcinogens and the organic material reportedly contains intact viral genetic material.

Many organizations have called for the establishment of government regulations regarding the amount of stuff that should be allowable in OR smoke. However, OSHA has been surprisingly reluctant to do anything and has not officially commented on the subject since 1996. The OSHA website does say that about half of the states have various regulations in place.

Some groups, particularly nursing organizations, are calling for the placement of smoke evacuators in all operating rooms. As you might suspect, these efforts are being vigorously supported by the manufacturers of smoke evacuators.

I attempted to find some real evidence about all this, but it is hard to come by. There have been no randomized trials involving surgical smoke.

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