Scrub Tech Causes Major Hepatitis Scare In Colorado

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DENVER (AP) — Kimberly Spencer's 9-year-old son went to Audubon Ambulatory Surgery Center last month for what was supposed to be a routine surgery. The rambunctious child stuck a BB in his ear and doctors had to operate to remove it.

What happened next shocked the family. They were notified that their son is one of 6,000 patients who may have been exposed to hepatitis C by a painkiller-addicted technician who had the disease and allegedly passed on dirty syringes to patients.

The technician has been jailed, thousands of rattled patients have been getting hepatitis C tests, and two medical facilities where she worked have been bombarded with questions about how they let it happen. Ten cases of hepatitis C have been linked to Rose Medical Center, where Kristen Diane Parker worked until April.

"It was originally a humorous child story we could write about in his baby book and now it's just gone south a little bit," Spencer said Friday as she awaited results of her son's blood test. "We're very optimistic, we think it's going to be just fine. It's still unnerving."

During a police interview videotaped June 30 that was played in court Thursday, the 26-year-old Parker told a detective that she kept dirty saline-filled syringes in her pocket and watched for opportunities when doctors and nurses left the room. She then allegedly stole syringes filled with Fentanyl from operating carts and replaced them with the used syringes.

"I didn't want to make it obvious to everyone that I was using," the 26-year-old Parker told the detective in the interview, saying she stole between 15 and 20 syringes of Fentanyl. "I knew my limit."

Health officials are conducting tests to determine if the 10 hepatitis C cases are definitively linked to Parker. Many people with hepatitis C don't know they are infected because they don't develop symptoms until years later.

Parker said she used between 100 to 250 micrograms of the drug each time, roughly enough medication for a 500-pound person, according to medical malpractice attorney Dr. Eric Steiner, a former cardiac anesthesiologist.

Thousands of former surgery patients have contacted Denver's Rose Medical Center and Audubon Ambulatory Surgery Center in Colorado Springs for free blood tests

being offered by both facilities. More than 1,900 former Rose patients have been tested, said hospital spokeswoman Leslie Teegarden.

An Audubon spokesman did not return messages Friday, but state health officials said those at that facility, including Spencer's son, will be tested again in about seven weeks because it takes that long for the disease to show up in the bloodstream. Hepatitis C is a treatable but incurable blood-borne disease that can cause serious liver problems.

Despite a hopeful attitude for Spencer, mundane every day occurrences have taken on disproportionate significance, such as Thursday when her son fell off his bike and skinned his knee.

"A simple little scrape to me is, 'Oh my gosh,' we need to take care of that, wash our hands, bandage him up. It makes you think twice, for everybody; the children he's playing with, the children I have at home. At the same time I don't want to overreact for him. He's nine.

"It's probably going to be like this for six more weeks until we know for sure."

Parker's case could end up being the first in Colorado where a patient got an infection from a health care worker who was tampering with drugs, said Dr. Ned Calonge, chief medical officer for the state health department.

Nationwide, there were four documented cases of nurses and doctors infecting patients with hepatitis C between 1992 and 2003, according to the latest information from Centers for Disease Control. A 1992 case cited in the CDC study involved a surgical technician who was using anesthesia medications.

Parker gave several reasons for using Fentanyl, which is a narcotic 80 to 100 times more powerful than morphine: to deal with a custody battle with her ex-husband over her 2-year-old son; six-hour stretches of being on her feet; and back pain from the physical requirements of moving patients around the operating rooms.

She also said she had a problem with painkillers in the past and she may have gotten hepatitis C when she used heroin last summer while living in New Jersey.

"She's going to take responsibility," Parker's attorney Gregory Graf said. He had argued that Parker should be released on bail because her cooperation with investigators proves she was not a flight risk.

A key point that could lead to more serious charges is whether she knew she was infected with hepatitis C.

She tested positive for the disease before starting her job at Rose in October, but she didn't follow up when told about it because she didn't have health insurance or money for a doctor and she got distracted with her new job.

She also said hospital officials didn't make it clear she tested positive. A federal

magistrate judge disagreed and declared her a danger to the community and ordered her held without bond, saying her actions showed significant disregard for the safety of others. Her next hearing is Oct. 6.

Those infected with hepatitis C are not barred from working in health services, so long as standard precautions are taken, according to the CDC.

"She knew she had hepatitis C, she's a health care worker and she understands how this disease is spread," said Pat Criscito, 56, an author and freelance writer from Monument south of Denver. She underwent back and hand surgery at Rose last fall and spent a sleepless night worrying about hepatitis C while she waited for her test results. Criscito said a positive result would have been meant certain death because years of arthritis treatment have severely weakened her immune system.

"If I was going to die, she deserves life in prison. I can't understand how somebody can do that to another human being," Criscito said, who tested negative and is waiting the results of a second test.

Hospital and state health officials aren't sure how many people were injected with Parker's dirty needles or with saline solution contaminated when Parker allegedly dipped her dirty needles to fill bogus syringes to cover her tracks.

Denver police launched a drug investigation in April and the state health department began its investigation June 1 after former Rose surgery patients began testing positive for hepatitis C. Parker was arrested June 30 on state drug charges, but Denver police turned the case over to federal agents when they discovered the tampering.

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