Lawmakers Want More Oversight Of Surgical Staff

Samantha Abernethy, Associated Press Writer

DENVER (AP) — The case of a surgical technician exposing 6,000 patients in Colorado to Hepatitis C while feeding her drug addiction has prompted legislators to consider requiring surgical staff to register with the state.

The House Health and Human Services Committee heard testimony Thursday on two bills designed to increase oversight of the medical staffers. The bills' sponsors say more oversight could have prevented Kristen Diane Parker from injecting herself with painkillers and leaving behind the dirty needles to be reused on patients.

"Our proposed legislation will help put a stop to repeat offenders who move from facility to facility seeking drugs," said Rep. Debbie Benefield, one of the bills' sponsors.

Parker was sentenced in February to 30 years in prison after being convicted of stealing painkillers by using syringes on herself, then leaving the dirty needles to be reused on patients.

Parker acknowledged that she took syringes filled with the painkiller Fentanyl, a painkiller 80 to 100 times stronger than morphine, from operating carts at Rose Medical Center in Denver. She said she injected herself and replaced the stolen syringes with ones filled with saline. Parker said she meant to use clean replacement needles but got careless.

She came under suspicion after a syringe in her pocket pricked a co-worker. She was fired, and Rose reported Parker to the authorities. But she was employed at Audubon Surgery Center in Colorado Springs when she was caught. About three dozen of her patients tested positive to Hepatitis C.

The proposed legislation would require employers to report a person under suspicion to the state Department of Health within two weeks and make information about a case available to the public, including future employers.

"Patients coming in for treatment should feel confident in the care they receive and curing one health problem should not expose you to another," said state Rep. Sara Gagliardi.

Attorney Dan Lipman said civil legal action is being taken against Parker and Rose Medical Center.

The legislation would also require surgery techs and assistants to register with the Department of Regulatory Agencies, and it would require employers to check for that registration before hiring.

Rosemary McCool of DORA said if it were discovered someone were diverting drugs, this legislation allows her to take immediate action by either evaluating them for addiction, or removing them from practice.

"Currently, hairdressers, massage therapists, cosmetologists and other professions like that are required to register with DORA," said Lipman, testifying in support of the legislation on behalf of the Colorado Trial Lawyers Association.

Six states — Indiana, Illinois, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington — regulate surgery techs.

Catherine Sparkman from the Association of Surgical Technologists testified Thursday that surgical techs and assistants are the only un-licensed members of a surgical team. She added there is no minimum competency level required to be a surgical tech or assistant. The AST supports the legislation.

Lauren Lollini, of Denver, was infected with Hepatitis C by Parker at Rose Medical Center and submitted a statement in support of the legislation, but pointed out how the bill could be improved.

"My hope is that healthcare facilities take these bills one step further and make sure they do their due diligence prior to hiring employees from out of state," said Lollini.

Prior to working in Colorado, Parker worked in Mount Kisco, N.Y., and in Houston, where she said she also stole medication, but claims she was more careful.

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne disease that can cause serious liver problems, including cirrhosis or liver cancer. Symptoms can include nausea, diarrhea, fatigue, pain and jaundice.

Nancy Steinfurth of Hep C Connection said some people choose not to pursue treatment — an 11-month process of pills and injections accompanied by sometimes debilitating side effects.

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