1. Purpose

Various research activities at the University (and off-site) involve sharps use, which on occasion lead to needlestick or similar sharps injuries. This Safety Note provides guidance to the research community on the minimum operational standard that should be put in place when sharps are used in a research environment.

2. Sharps

Needles, blades (such as scalpels), metal wires and other medical/research instruments with a sharp edge or tip needed to carry out specific research or healthcare work and could cause an injury by cutting or pricking the skin are defined as sharps.

3. Sharps injuries

Sharps injuries are a known risk in research, health and social care sector\(^1\). Sharps contaminated with biological agents or chemicals can transmit diseases (including blood born viruses\(^2\) e.g. hepatitis B, C and human immunodeficiency virus) and/or introduce toxic chemicals into the body. Due to the transmission risk, sharps injuries can cause worry and stress to the injured person and can be serious.

4. Who is at risk

Those who directly handle sharps (e.g. researchers, technicians, academics, students and visiting students) and others (e.g. co-workers, cleaners, porters, maintenance workers, visitors and members of public).

5. What to do

Sharps are used for a variety of purposes in research, as a result the response to an injury will vary. Use of sharps both on and off-site (field trips, working at other research facilities, institutions and Universities) must be risk assessed prior to starting the work. Often work involving sharps with open sources of ionising radiation, biological agents, genetically modified organisms, human and animal tissue and body fluids (blood, saliva, urine, excrement, etc) will require the authorisation from Health and Safety Services. Risk assessment must identify a suitable response, proportionate to the risk posed by the sharps' injury. This could range from simply washing the cut/injury under running water/soap and applying a plaster to a full medical/occupational health assessment at A&E (accident and emergency) or transport to a more specialist facility or quarantine/isolation ward.
Risk assessment based local arrangements must be put in place before the start of work. These arrangements should include:

- A set of local rules and a copy of signed risk assessment including full details of the chemicals/biological agents being used
- Induction, training and authorisation requirements and records
- Emergency contact details and first aid arrangements (including a phone line, transport arrangement and specialist/occupational health contact arrangements in high risk cases)

Near misses and incidents must be reported at the Health and Safety Services website.

Health & Safety Services
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References: