

AIDS AND HEALTH WORKERS

All hospitals and clinics should have general rules for preventing the spread of infections. If followed, these rules are sufficient to protect the careful health worker from becoming infected with the HIV virus. In this way, the caring for these patients need not and should not be compromised.

However, in many hospitals in South Africa there are shortages of resources which lead to problems in the control of diseases. The health worker should check to see if the hospital rules regarding infection are working adequately and if they are not, should challenge the hospital authorities on the question of infection control. It should be noted however, that even when there are policies for infection control, it may be extremely difficult to practice safe procedures when working under pressures of overcrowding and staff shortages.

Measures for general protection

Infection control rules should entail:

- the disposal of needles and syringes in a properly constructed container which should be clearly marked "SHARP", "SYRINGES". These should not be put into plastic bags.
- the sterilization before use, of all non-disposable medical instruments, needles and syringes
- the use of rubber gloves when cleaning up spillage of blood and other body fluids and when disposing of contaminated materials
- the disinfection of contaminated surfaces in a 1:10 solution of household bleach to water is sufficient
- washing of hands with soap and water after any contact with contaminated material

- washing of hands before smoking, eating and drinking
- covering existing cuts and grazes with waterproof dressings
- care when taking specimens from infected patients. Avoid pricking oneself with infected needles or allowing contaminated blood or body fluids to come into contact with grazes or open wounds
- Blood specimens should only be taken by trained and experienced staff.
- Gloves, aprons and gowns should be worn when taking specimens from an infected patient. A mask should be worn if there is a risk from splashing.
- Contaminated surfaces and the outside of specimen containers should be closed, labelled and sealed in plastic bags. If a health worker has sustained a needle prick injury the blood should be allowed to flow freely. Wash the area of the wound liberally with soap and water. The incident should be reported to the supervisor and the health worker must make sure the accident is recorded.



If routine infection control measures are followed, health workers have little risk of being infected at the workplace

Guidelines for health workers caring for an AIDS or HIV infected patient

All the general measures mentioned above apply to each of the groups that follow. All of these groups have the right to be informed of AIDS or HIV infected patients that they may be caring for.

Nursing staff

Nursing staff should be fully informed of the ways in which HIV is spread and how to avoid infection. Patients who are HIV positive or who have AIDS do not require isolation. They do however, need skilful nursing and sympathetic caring. Because AIDS patients are especially at risk from infections which people without AIDS can resist, normal hospital infection control measures should be rigorously followed.

Ambulance staff

They should follow routine infection control measures. If the HIV infected or AIDS patient is bleeding or incontinent, rubber/plastic gloves and disposable aprons or gowns should be worn. Goggles and masks are only required if there is a risk of blood being splashed into the eyes.

When giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation one should, where possible, use the equipment provided for that purpose. There have, however, been no recorded cases of AIDS being transmitted from mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Special mouth pieces are available.

It is not necessary to fumigate the ambulance after it has been used to transport a person with AIDS or who is infected with the HIV virus.

Laundry staff

Occasionally needles and other contaminated waste is found amongst the linen sent for laundry. Laundry staff should watch for this hazard and other staff should take care when bagging clothes and linen for laundering.

Washable clothes and linen that are stained with blood or semen or any other body fluids should be washed in a well maintained washing machine on the hot cycle, or boiled before hand washing. Heavily contaminated linen should arrive in a specially marked bag and should be handled wearing gloves and an apron which should be disposed of in a labelled plastic bag.

Non washable items should dry cleaned.

Hospital porters

Protective clothing is only necessary if patients are bleeding or incontinent. In such cases disposable gloves, aprons and gowns should be worn.

All specimen containers should be carried in specially designed racks or boxes. Porters are advised not to handle specimens which are broken, leaking or unlabelled.

Specimens known to be infected should be sealed in plastic bags and should be labelled.

If a specimen is dropped and broken, this must be reported to the relevant supervisor. No attempt should be made to clean up spillage unless the cleaner has been taught the correct procedure.

When removing waste sacks one should watch for sharp objects that may be carelessly mixed with other rubbish. If found the incident should be reported to the supervisor.

Non classified workers

Mopping up waste and blood and body fluids should be done with gloves and aprons and using a bleach solution.

Sorting out soiled linen and medical instruments should be done wearing gloves and aprons.

Post mortem staff

Only experienced anatomical pathology technicians should assist in post mortems of patients with AIDS or with HIV infection.

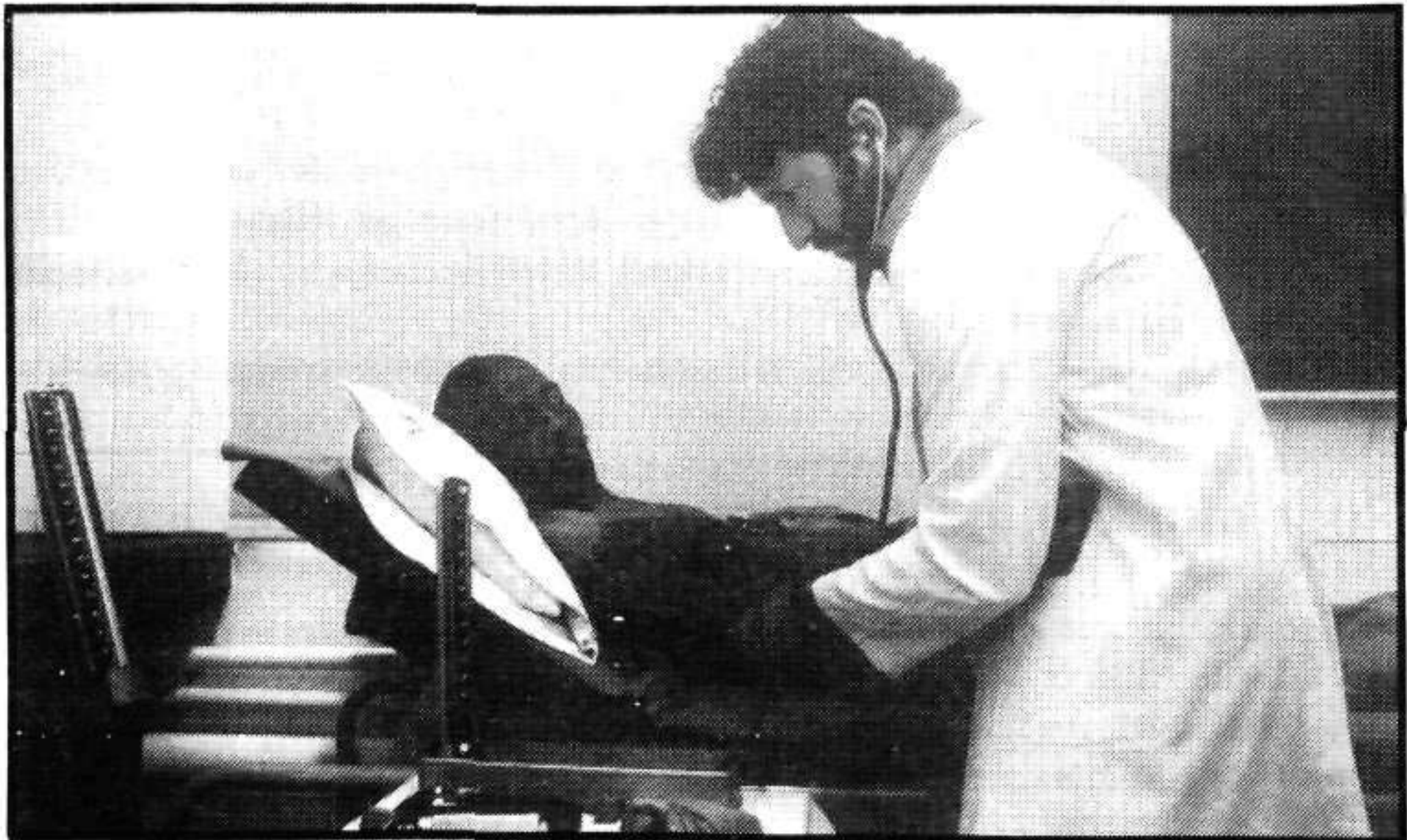
Disposable gloves and aprons should be worn when transporting all bodies to the mortuary or post mortem room.

If patients have died of AIDS or hepatitis B, the body should be enclosed in a plastic bag to prevent the spread of infectious material.

CONCLUSION

- Health workers should be given a working knowledge of the cause, signs and symptoms, ways of spread and ways to prevent the spread of the HIV infection and AIDS.
- It is important for all health workers be informed of patients with HIV infection or AIDS whom they are caring for.
- Supervisors should be informed of all accidents involving needle prick injuries and blood and body fluid spillage. The supervisor must keep records of all of these accidents. If these do not exist or are not being followed, health workers should insist from the hospital authorities that they be implemented.
- The virus is NOT easily transmitted and if the guidelines mentioned in this article are adhered to, the chances of health workers catching the virus through their work is minimal.
- This implies that there is NO NEED for health workers to discriminate against HIV infected or AIDS patients.

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Health workers should be fully aware
of the ways HIV virus is spread