

Hepatitis

Blood tests for syphilis, HIV, and hepatitis A, B, and C, as a requirement for obtaining an operator's Health Card, were discontinued in 1997. At that time, we discussed extensively the inadequacies of current serum testing for these diseases. The tests had allowed us to identify when an operator had been previously infected with hepatitis, by the presence of antibodies, however, these operators were no longer infectious as there was no surface antigen present to indicate active disease. Operators would only pose a threat to their patrons during periods of active disease. Hepatitis is a reportable disease to the SNHD, and any active cases are reported to us by doctors and hospitals as required by law. The blood tests were costly and ineffective in preventing disease spread. Our position in 1997 was that funds could be better used to immunize operators. Annual blood tests were costing operators between \$150 and \$250 annually. The hepatitis B immunization series would cost only \$198, spread over a 6 month period, and would provide the operator with immunity for at least 10 years.

The health district implemented the immunization requirement in 1999 as a measure to reduce hepatitis A infections locally. Hepatitis A rates are at historical lows in Clark County and nationwide as a result of the introduction of the vaccine and recommendations to immunize people in high risk groups, including children.

Hepatitis A is acquired primarily by the fecal-oral route by either person-to-person contact or ingestion of contaminated food or water. Hepatitis A can produce either asymptomatic infections or symptomatic infections after an average incubation period of 28 days. Symptoms can include fever, malaise, anorexia, nausea, abdominal discomfort, dark urine, and jaundice, that can last up to two (2) months, although 10% to 15% of persons have prolonged or relapsing disease lasting up to six (6) months. Eleven percent to 22% of persons who have hepatitis A are hospitalized and an estimated 100 deaths occur each year in the United States as a result of fulminant hepatitis A. The use of the hepatitis A vaccination in a community produces a highly immune population, decreases the incidence of hepatitis A and provides an opportunity to eventually eradicate this infection.

Valid concerns have been raised regarding the safety of these vaccines. Surveillance of adverse reactions to all vaccines is conducted continuously by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and there is a Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System (VAERS). Extensive information is available at the CDC website www.cdc.gov. The hepatitis B vaccine has been available for many years and has been extensively studied. More than an estimated 10 million adults and 2 million infants had been vaccinated in the U.S. by 1996 with very few adverse reaction events reported to VAERS. The most common side effect was pain at the injection site and a mild fever. Although the hepatitis A vaccine has not been widespread use as long as the hepatitis B vaccine, an estimated 1.3 million people have been vaccinated with hepatitis A in Europe and Asia, and approximately 50,000 persons were vaccinated in the initial clinical studies here in the U.S. with no serious adverse events attributed definitively to the hepatitis A vaccine. Any presumed risk for adverse events that might be casually associated with these vaccines must be balanced with the expected risk for hepatitis virus-related liver disease.

The use of Standard Precautions and attention to basic sanitation practices must be diligently practiced by tattoo operators, as there are many communicable diseases for which there are no vaccinations. Regarding HIV and hepatitis C – both of these diseases are spread by blood and body fluid and infected individuals can show no symptoms. Strict adherence to Standard Precautions is the only protection an operator has at this time to prevent the spread of the diseases.

The Southern Nevada Health District's position is that in the interest of public health, hepatitis vaccinations, although not required are highly recommended for persons in occupations that expose them daily to the blood and body fluids of the general public. These vaccinations protect not only the operator, but his or her intimate contacts and family, the customers, and the community in general. The vaccines are available at SNHD for a minimal fee.