

Two Washington hospitals urge HIV tests after syringe swap

March 16 2016, by Phuong Le

Two hospitals in Washington state are the latest to urge nearly 1,500 patients to get tested for hepatitis and HIV after a former surgery technician was charged with stealing and swapping a syringe in Colorado.

Rocky Allen, 28, has pleaded not guilty to federal charges that he took a syringe of painkillers and replaced it with one containing another substance at a Denver-area hospital in January. Prosecutors have said he has a history of moving from hospital to hospital and lying about his past to steal drugs.

Allen has been fired from at least four medical centers in four different states, according to court records and the hospitals. Facilities in Arizona, California and Colorado have in recent weeks offered free testing to its patients as a safety precaution, but public health officials say there is a low risk of exposure to bloodborne pathogens such as HIV.

In Washington, Northwest Hospital and Medical Center in Seattle and Lakewood Surgery Center say they were testing affected patients to be safe. Northwest notified 1,340 people who had surgery in early 2012 in an operating room where Allen may have worked. Lakewood said it is alerting 135 patients.

"We characterize the risk to any patient as low, in part because we don't have confirmed evidence of (a drug) diversion at Northwest Hospital," said James Apa, a spokesman with the Seattle-King County Public

Health.

A spokeswoman with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also said the risk is likely low.

Allen's attorney, Timothy O'Hara, has said his client is a Navy veteran who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Allen served as a medical worker in Afghanistan and he started using drugs after witnessing horrors there, O'Hara said. Messages left with the attorney were not immediately returned Wednesday.

Allen worked at three facilities in Washington, including Naval Hospital Bremerton, state health officials said.

The Navy facility did not notify patients because Allen was not involved in operating room cases, did not have access to controlled substances and tested negative for bloodborne pathogens during his employment from 2008 to 2011, spokesman Douglas Stutz said.

Allen was fired from Northwest Hospital in 2012 after about 10 weeks, said a hospital spokeswoman, who declined to disclose the reason.

Allen worked for 20 days in 2013 as surgical technician trainee at Scripps Green Hospital in San Diego, California, before he was terminated. The hospital said it determined that "he was trying to switch a syringe of fentanyl citrate—a pain medication—with a syringe of saline."

Allen also was fired from HonorHealth John C. Lincoln Hospital in Phoenix in October 2014 after he tested positive for the painkiller fentanyl while working as a surgical attendant, court records show.

He was most recently fired from Swedish Medical Center in the Denver

area after he was seen taking a syringe filled with painkillers from an operating room on Jan. 22, officials said.

About 3,000 patients there have been tested, Swedish spokeswoman Nicole Williams said. State health officials will release those test results after its investigation, she said.

Allen was arrested last month in Colorado and is charged in federal court in Denver with tampering with a consumer product and obtaining a controlled substance by deceit.

At his preliminary hearing last month, a judge agreed that Allen suffered from a "considerable drug problem." But she said she had heard no evidence that he had set out to hurt others.

Allen surrendered his passport and is out on a \$25,000 bail, court records show. The judge also ordered him to stay at a halfway house and get drug treatment.

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