Underage allied-health students require special guidelines

Q What are the guidelines for permitting students (some not yet 18 years old) training in allied-health classrooms to perform venipunctures and fingersticks and to handle blood and body fluids?

A The situation involves policy-making based on science and common sense — as well as on law and regulation. Generally, students are entitled to protection from hazards. This is especially true when they are required to take a class. Underage students are another matter in that they are not necessarily able to consent to assume risks posed by performing invasive procedures.

First, you may wish to determine whether state laws or laboratory regulations (which vary from place to place) prohibit underage students from performing invasive procedures. Many educational institutions prohibit these students from engaging in such procedures for a variety of reasons, including risk-management and consent concerns. Obtain a copy of your organization’s policies regarding acceptable risks in training modules or laboratory exercises. These guidelines should give you a sense of what to do.

If guidelines do not exist, convene a committee to draft them. The guidelines should consider not only the risks involved in handling blood and body fluids but also the student’s level of education and experience. New students should receive more protection than experienced ones; one size definitely does not fit all. If appropriate, you may design your curriculum to provide more protection than the guidelines stipulate.

Selecting exercises to include in a curriculum requires balancing the experience needed to master the material against the potential risks. Typing blood, for example, may be an interesting and effective exercise for high-school biology students. Given the fact, however, that it poses the risk of transmitting a variety of bloodborne diseases and that the exercise is not absolutely necessary to teach about blood groups (aside from the reputation that high-school students have of being notoriously careless in the lab), it probably should not be included.

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Once you are aware of existing guidelines or have drawn up your own, design exercises to be as safe as possible for the participants. If the class is designed to train phlebotomists to draw blood from real and perhaps difficult patients, a training arm, for example, may be a useful starting point but probably is not sufficient to produce the skill level required to matriculate the course. For many purposes (except in the case of training blood-bank techs), teachers can use commercially available blood substitutes instead of actual blood specimens when conducting blood-typing exercises. By using such alternative reagents and training devices, teachers can reduce risks to the lowest possible level. In general, if a reasonable alternative to a hazardous material exists, use it, especially in a survey setting or an introductory course.

If you determine that proper education requires performing venipunctures and fingersticks or handling real blood and body fluid specimens, start the exercises with a thorough grounding in proper safety techniques as well as post-exposure procedures. We have all heard lab horror stories in which all the students used the same lancet to stick their fingers. As you conduct exercises, provide proper oversight, make available appropriate first aid and decontamination supplies, and prepare to handle any exposures just as you would in a professional laboratory. You will also want to counsel and, if necessary, discipline or withdraw students who fail to take proper safety precautions.

Perhaps most importantly — especially in the case of underage students — you will want to make certain that students (and their parents, as the case may be) are fully aware of risks and safety procedures and that they have the option to object or decline to participate. If possible, provide an alternative experience, especially in survey courses, for those who opt out.

You will also want to document your efforts by obtaining a signed release indicating that the student and/or parent is aware of the proposed lab exercise, including details of what will be done and what safety procedures are required; understands the risks; and agrees to participate and to abide by all pertinent safety rules.

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