

3 states investigating hep C-infected scrub tech

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DENVER (AP) — Hundreds more patients have been advised to get tested for hepatitis C as health officials in two more states launched investigations into an infected Colorado surgery tech who allegedly swapped clean needles for dirty ones to feed her painkiller addiction.

Kristen Diane Parker, 26, is accused of taking syringes meant for patients off operating room carts and replacing them with used syringes filled with saline solution at medical centers in Denver and Colorado Springs. The syringes she allegedly stole were filled with fentanyl, a narcotic painkiller 80 to 100 times stronger than morphine.

State health and hospital officials say up to 6,000 patients who had surgery at the two Colorado centers since October may have been exposed to hepatitis C.

Now, health officials in New York and Texas say Parker also worked at hospitals there, and they've launched their own investigations.

"It's clear the scope of the investigation has widened," Jeff Dorschner, spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office in Denver, said Thursday.

Northern Westchester Hospital in Mount Kisco, N.Y., has advised 2,800 patients who had surgery there between Oct. 8, 2007, and Feb. 28, 2008 to get tested.

In Texas, officials launched an investigation Wednesday into whether Parker exposed patients to the blood-borne liver disease when she worked at Christus St. John Hospital outside Houston between May 2005 and October 2006. Authorities and hospital officials didn't have a count of how many patients underwent surgery at Christus St. John Hospital while Parker worked there.

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"It's very early in our investigation and we have not actually received enough information back to determine whether there are any potential persons at risk," said Rita Obey, spokeswoman for the Harris County health department, which is leading the investigation.

Parker faces federal charges for the alleged incidents in Colorado. Dorschner said federal prosecutors in Denver are presenting the case to a grand jury and additional charges are possible.

New York health officials said it's not known whether Parker was infected with hepatitis C when she worked at the Mount Kisco hospital.

"Additional information has emerged, however, suggesting that Parker may have engaged in similar conduct when employed at NWH," New York health officials said in a statement.

No patients at the hospital have been known to have contracted the virus while Parker worked there, state health officials said.

Parker worked at Rose Medical Center in Denver from Oct. 21 to April 13 and at Colorado Springs' Audubon Surgery Center from May 4 until June 29. About 4,700 patients may have been exposed at Rose, while Audubon is telling about 1,200 patients to get tested.

Additional testing will determine whether 10 hepatitis C cases linked to Rose hospital came from Parker.

Health officials worry that patients may have been exposed to the disease from the used syringes left on operating carts and from saline solution contaminated by Parker dipping her dirty needles so she could refill the syringes with liquid to cover her tracks.

Denver police arrested her on drug charges June 30, but turned her over to federal authorities after a detective learned of the alleged tampering.

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A federal magistrate judge ordered Parker held without bond, saying she switched the needles even though she knew she had hepatitis C.

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