Hepatitis C and Bad News

January 12, 2013 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

Here's the sort of news article that makes me feel like starting my day with a gin and tonic (Don't worry, I won't): "Man Allegedly Exposed Jail Staff to Hepatitis C" Branson Tri-Lakes News January 9, 2013.

The man was in jail on multiple felony charges, some drug-related. According to the article, "he told jail staff he was going to smear his feces all over the cell," which he did. He was ordered to clean it up, but he didn't. The man was charged with committing a class C felony when he "knowingly caused a corrections employee to come into contact with feces...knowing he was infected with hepatitis C." The man was removed from his cell and placed on a suicide watch.

Here is what gets to me about this article--it gives bad information about hepatitis C. This virus is transmitted by blood-to-blood contact. Fecal matter is not a route of transmission for hepatitis C. Even if the man was bleeding rectally, the jail staff would only be exposed if their blood came into direct contact with infected blood. Who is going to clean up fecal matter without gloves?

Yes, this is gross, it is wrong, and assuming the report is true, the man is blameworthy. However, clearly mental illness needs to be considered here, possibly hepatic encephalopathy (a type of dementia related to end-stage liver disease). Poop-smearing is not normal behavior and the fact that he ended up on suicide watch are two clear indications of impaired mental function.

It makes me sad when hepatitis C infection is seen or used as a destructive force. I wish everyone with hepatitis C acted responsibly with their blood and body secretions. However, with millions of infected people, it is fairly likely that we are going to run into these tragic stories from time to time. I think they are best left unreported. This certainly wasn't worth making the news or becoming a felony charge.

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