Hepatitis C and that Bloody Guilt

January 14, 2014 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

A woman with hepatitis C told me this story. She was in a horrendous accident, resulting in massive blood loss. When people stopped to help, her only thought was for their safety. While blood was pouring out of her wounds, she kept saying, “Keep away, I have hepatitis C.”

Listening to this story, I wanted to crawl into a fetal position and wail, because as tragic as the situation was, I understood her reaction. Having hepatitis C is a huge burden, one that carries a heavy responsibility. Most people who live with this virus take the responsibility to extremes. As a nurse, I have fielded many desperate calls from patients. “Help! I cut my lip on a soda can. While I was looking for a tissue, my kid drank from the can.” Or, “My toddler was sucking on a washcloth in the tub that I had used to blot a shaving cut.”

The list is endless. I remember slicing myself while helping to prepare dinner in a church kitchen. I acted like the room was a declared disaster area. If I could have cordoned off my blood and called in a Hazmat Team, I would have.

Now I know better. I know that hepatitis C will not survive the digestive system, and although it is conceivable that someone could get hepatitis C from blood-contaminated food, it is so unlikely that it isn’t worth the panic. Clean it up as best as you can, keep people with obvious open wounds out of the area, and don’t lose sleep over it. If you have bleach, then one part bleach to ten parts water is the best solution. If you don’t have bleach, then use what you have. Here is a link to more information about hepatitis C transmission.

Underneath this is a bigger problem, one that can’t be mopped up with a bleach solution. I am referring to the shame, guilt, and fear that we carry because we feel infectious. When I first understood that I carried a virus that replicates a trillion times a day in my body, I felt like I was walking around with a weapon of mass destruction in me. Hepatitis C felt bad enough, but it was the shame that hurt me the most.

Now that I am cured, the change I notice the most is that I don’t panic when I bleed. I am still careful with my blood, but that gut-wrenching fear-reaction is gone. If this were the only benefit I would get from hepatitis C treatment, it would be worth it.

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