

Tainted tissue scare hits 125 Surgeries across Canada exposed more patients

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Health Canada confirmed Thursday that 125 people in the country were exposed to potentially contaminated bone and tissue products from a U.S. supplier, including 21 patients at Windsor's Hotel-Dieu Grace Hospital.

"To date, no known adverse events from products using Biomedical tissue have been reported in Canada," health department spokeswoman Nathalie Lalonde said in an e-mailed statement.

She also said no regulatory changes for screening imported bone and tissue will be made.

"This is an attempted fraudulent issue," she said in a phone interview. "It was caught because the system worked."

U.S. authorities discovered last fall that Biomedical Tissue Services of New Jersey was selling products to U.S. suppliers, who sold some to Canadian suppliers, without properly documenting that the donors were not exposed to diseases such as HIV, hepatitis and syphilis.

U.S. officials ordered a recall last October, and Health Canada advised any "end users" -- hospitals and dental offices, for example -- to pull unused products from their shelves.

They were also ordered to contact patients who had received these transplants.

Many were orthopedic or neurosurgical patients who received transplanted bone fragments as part of the procedures. Health officials stressed that the risk of contracting the diseases is minimal, but cannot be ruled out. Patients were to be advised to take blood tests.

Lalonde said of the 300 products known to have been shipped to Canada over the last two years, 125 people ended up with them. In December, the department surveyed all Canadian end users and determined that so far no illnesses have been documented.

A delay in confirming one patient's case held up the notification process in Windsor until mid-January.

Lalonde said the department is monitoring the situation, as some patients have yet to be tested.

Hotel-Dieu Grace chief of staff Dr. Art Kidd said the hospital was notified in mid-November of the situation by Health Canada, and efforts started at identifying the patients who had had surgeries dating to 2003. Kidd said the delay was not significant because most of the procedures were done before 2005, and the hospital wanted to confirm all the facts before notifying patients -- first by telephone and then with letters. As of Thursday, some local patients

had not yet been tested, and one woman vacationing in Florida had not been contacted, Kidd said.

Two other hospitals, Toronto Western and Hamilton Health Sciences, confirmed seven cases between them and said they notified those patients before Christmas. But they never announced the measures until contacted by The Star on Thursday.

Hotel-Dieu Grace officials said they publicly announced the situation this week out of public interest. Kidd said no one other than the 21 need worry, and although the risk is small for that group, it cannot be ruled out.

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