A former surgical technician who apparently infected more than a dozen patients with hepatitis C by stealing fentanyl and placing used syringes back on anesthesia carts pleaded guilty September 25, 2009, to federal charges of tampering and theft, the Denver Post reported.

Kristen Diane Parker, 26, faces sentencing in December for 10 of the 38 counts against her. The recommended sentence is 20 years in prison. Remaining counts were dismissed. Parker agreed to further blood testing and other steps needed to address victim issues.

Parker admitted she stole the fentanyl while employed at Rose Medical Center in Denver between October 2008 and April 2009 and at Audubon Surgery Center in Colorado Springs in May and June 2009, according to the plea agreement. About 6,000 patients had surgery at the facilities during the time Parker worked there.

As of September 25, 26 patients from Rose had positive HCV tests epidemiologically linked to Parker, and 15 had been positively linked to the case by more definitive viral sequencing analysis, the Colorado health department reported. One patient who tested positive at Audubon was initially linked to Parker, but the link was not borne out by viral sequencing.

Contaminated syringes

According to the plea agreement, Parker, who was infected with hepatitis C, while employed as a scrub tech at the 2 facilities stole fentanyl syringes from ORs, injected herself with the drug, and replaced the syringes on the anesthesia carts with used saline-filled syringes, which were then used on patients.

Parker acknowledged she was positive for hepatitis C when she started working at Rose, according to the plea agreement. In March 2009, a Rose employee reported she was stuck by a needle in Parker’s scrub top pocket, and she had found Parker in an OR to which she was not assigned. Parker was questioned but denied use of narcotics, and a drug test was negative for narcotics.

A few weeks later, Parker was again found in an OR to which she was not assigned. She claimed to be setting up for the next surgery. She was immediately screened for drugs. The test came back positive for fentanyl, and she was fired. Rose reported the incident to the health department and Drug Enforcement Administration. Meanwhile, Parker sought employment at Audubon, asking that Rose not be contacted as a reference.

Health department investigates

About the same time, the health department received 9 positive HCV
tests from patients who had had surgery at Rose. The department says its investigation suggested the infections were caused by exposures during surgery and coincided with Parker’s employment there. Parker was originally charged in July 2009 with tampering and other drug-related charges.

Rose notified about 4,700 patients who had surgery during the time of Parker’s employment, and Audubon notified about 1,200. ✤