



NRC NEWS

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NRC ISSUES NEW GUIDANCE ON RELEASE OF PATIENTS FOLLOWING IODINE TREATMENT FOR THYROID CONDITIONS

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has issued new guidance to medical licensees concerning out-patient treatment of thyroid patients with iodine-131 (I-131), strongly discouraging doctors from recommending patients stay at hotels immediately after treatment.

The guidance responds to continuing concerns that thyroid patients, who typically remain radioactive for a few days following administration of I-131, sometimes check into hotels or motels instead of going home, raising the potential that other people – especially hotel workers and guests – may unknowingly be exposed to radiation.

“There is no evidence that patients treated with radioactive iodine pose any significant health or safety risk to members of the public,” said Robert J. Lewis, director of the NRC’s Division of Materials Safety and State Agreements. “However, it is the NRC’s goal to limit unnecessary radiation exposure to anyone to the greatest degree possible, and it is the doctor’s responsibility to instruct the patient on how to achieve that.”

NRC regulations allow I-131 patients to be released immediately following treatment when the radiation dose to third parties is not likely to exceed 500 millirem. (An average person receives about 300 millirem each year from natural and background radiation.) The regulations assume the dose would apply principally to the patient’s family or other caregivers during the first few days the patient spends at home following treatment. Accordingly, doctors are required to consider the patient’s living conditions and provide instructions for avoiding unnecessary exposure to family members.

The new guidance reminds doctors to inquire about the patient’s intended destination following treatment so that appropriate instructions may be given on how to manage exposure to other people. The NRC recognizes that some patients may refuse to be hospitalized and refuse (or be unable) to return home, choosing instead to check into a hotel. Doctors must still provide adequate instructions on how the patient can keep radiation doses to others as low as possible.

The new guidance is contained in Regulatory Issue Summary 2011-01, dated Jan. 25, and available on the NRC website at <http://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/doc-collections/gen-comm/reg-issues/2011/index.html>. In previous guidance issued in 2003 and supplemented in 2009 (both documents can be found at <http://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/doc-collections/gen-comm/info-notices/2003/>), the agency discussed how patients might trigger homeland security radiation alarms. And in guidance issued May 12, 2008 (<http://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/doc-collections/gen-comm/reg-issues/2008/>), the NRC discussed precautions to protect young children who may come into contact with I-131 patients.

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