

Tip of the Month

Slap Happy

Do you go around slapping people you don't know? Unless you're collecting misdemeanors, most people wouldn't even think about slapping a stranger on the street. But put the stranger in the hospital and suddenly slapping him is okay. Where's the logic?

If you're one of the many healthcare professionals who slaps patients' arms silly in an attempt to find veins to draw blood from, you might want to reconsider. Next time your slapping routine is about to commence, ask yourself these questions:

- Is it possible the patient has been abused by a parent or spouse, and that my slapping could rip open emotional wounds?
- Is it possible the patient might not understand or appreciate this technique?
- Is it possible slapping for veins can alter blood tests?

Could it be possible the patient is a "professional victim" looking for a reason to file assault and battery charges against me and my employer? Stranger things have happened.

The answer to all of these questions is "yes." You can't be sure patients don't mind; or assume they haven't been abused; or that slapping won't alter blood tests; or that they aren't looking for a reason to file lawsuits. Perhaps that's why the Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute removed the passage from their venipuncture standard in 2003 that advocated "tapping sharply at the vein site with index and second finger."

Fortunately, there are other ways to distend veins for easier location than slapping them silly. Next time you're tempted, try these alternatives:

- Apply a warm compress to the site for 2–3 minutes to dilate the veins in the area;
- Lower the patient's arm relative to the heart so blood fills the limb, distending the veins;
- Ask the patient to squeeze, but not pump, the fist to bring more blood into the muscles and, hence, the veins feeding them.

There's a right and a wrong time to slap someone. Some might slap a choking victim between the shoulder blades to dislodge an airway obstruction. Slapping your child's hand when it comes close to a burner or electrical outlet makes for a quick lesson learned. Some jokes are real knee-slappers. But slapping a patient's arm just to locate a vein for drawing blood is overly aggressive and unprofessional. It might not be aggravated assault, but it can be an assault on their emotional status, the quality of the specimen, and on your employer, should the patient be looking for a windfall.

The next time you think about slapping patients: think of the possibilities.