

Tip of the Month

Of All the Nerve



Every phlebotomist knows where the veins are in the antecubital area, but do you know where the nerves lie? If you're not sure, don't stick another patient until you are.

Nerve injury is an inherent risk of phlebotomy. Unfortunately, many phlebotomists are never taught the location of the nerves in the antecubital area before they draw patients. As a result, they exercise poor judgment when selecting veins and risky attempts to relocate the needle when they miss the vein. Either of these mistakes can lead to a permanently disabling nerve injury and a lawsuit.

In order to reduce the risk of nerve injury to its lowest degree, all who draw blood specimens must be acutely aware of the location of the nerves in the antecubital area. The most frequently injured nerve is the median nerve, which lies in close proximity to the basilic vein. And if you don't know where the basilic vein is, you shouldn't be drawing blood. Period.

Not all nerve injuries are avoidable, but those that occur because the individual lacks an understanding of the anatomy of the antecubital area not only subject the patient to unnecessary suffering, but the healthcare worker's employer to an indefensible lapse in their training protocol. That means liability. Therefore, whenever collecting blood specimens, keep these tips in mind to fully protect your patient from injury and your employer from a lawsuit:

- Because nerves lie adjacent to the basilic vein, probing for this vein should never be attempted;
- Because the median nerve can pass over the basilic vein, selecting this vein before ruling out other, less risky veins (such as the median cubital vein) fails to reduce the risk of the procedure to its lowest possible level;
- Because a sensation in the patient of a shooting, electrical pain should tell you that you have provoked a nerve, continuing with the venipuncture risks further injury and subjects you and your employer to liability;
- Because tingling or numbness in the hand or fingers indicates nerve involvement, if you are aware of these sensations, terminate the attempted venipuncture immediately.

Thousands of patients suffer nerve injuries every year during venipuncture procedures. Most of them are not permanent. But for those patients whose injury becomes life-long, an avoidable mistake can change their quality of life.