

Empathy Vs Personal Safety



Safety Bulletin

Case Study: Biological Exposure Following an Attempt to Assist an Unconscious Person

Summary of the Incident

An operative attending a sheltered accommodation discovered an unconscious male on a staircase who appeared to be struggling to breathe. Acting out of concern, the operative placed the individual in the recovery position and attempted to clear his airway by placing their fingers inside the person's mouth. Staff were alerted, emergency services attended, and medical intervention was provided.

Later that day, the operative noticed a small cut on their finger – the same hand that had contacted the individual's mouth. After seeking medical advice and attending hospital for tests, the operative received a positive result for exposure to several biological agents, one of which being HIV.

This incident highlights the real risks associated with providing physical assistance in uncontrolled environments.



Compassion is admirable, but personal safety must come first.

Key Learning Points

- ✓ Helping others is instinctive – but rushing in without assessing the risks can have life-changing consequences.
- ✓ Bodily fluids (saliva, blood, vomit) present significant biological hazards.
- ✓ First response actions should always prioritise **your safety**, in line with first aid training and safe-system-of-work principles.
- ✓ Untrained personnel should **never** insert fingers or hands into another person's mouth.
- ✓ Professional medical advice should be sought immediately in any situation involving potential exposure to bodily fluids.

What To Do in a Situation Like This

1. Stop and Assess the Scene

- ✓ Is the area safe to enter?
- ✓ Are there hazards such as drug paraphernalia, bodily fluids, or aggressive behaviours?

2. Keep Your Distance Where Possible

- ✓ Do not touch the casualty unless trained and it is safe to do so.
- ✓ Avoid contact with body fluids at all times.

3. Call for Help Immediately

- ✓ Dial **999** for any unconscious person or suspected overdose.
- ✓ Follow instructions from emergency call handlers.

4. Use PPE if Trained and Available

- ✓ Disposable gloves, CPR face shields, or barrier devices should always be used if physical contact is unavoidable.

5. Do Not Place Hands Inside a Casualty's Mouth

- ✓ This poses a high risk of cuts, bites, and fluid exposure, and is not part of standard first aid practice.

6. Report and Seek Medical Advice

- ✓ If any exposure occurs, report it immediately and contact **111** or attend A&E as directed.

Takeaway Message

The operative acted with compassion and the best intentions – as many of us instinctively would. However, this incident is a powerful reminder that **you cannot help others if you place yourself in danger.**

- ✓ Empathy is vital.
- ✓ Safety is essential.
- ✓ Balance both – your wellbeing matters.