

## **The Outlaw Balloon (Man v. The 260 Balloon)**

Sounds like a law suit doesn't it. With all the research being done on laughter and the immune system, hospitals may start paying more attention to the clowns in their midst. This can mean clowns will get staff positions, but it could mean looking at us through their "liability eyes." Generalizations seem to become rules too easily -- as with the outlawing of balloons in pediatrics. It is said that the reason for this is the possibility of small children choking on deflated balloon fragments. When I asked my hospital the reason, I was told it was due to one incident. There were so many balloons on an IV monitor that the doctor during a "code blue" couldn't see the readings. I believe the balloons referred to here were helium balloons. I also heard that helium escapes those balloons and too many in one room have made a patient sicker. However, as much as I have asked around, I have never found any story, rumor or evidence that a child or anyone else has ever been hurt by a 260-balloon sculpture in a hospital. If you have any information even, if it is hearsay, please write me. It is important as care givers (and we are care givers) to be aware of these problems.

With liability and law suites so prevalent, another area of litigation is opening up. It was asbestos, then breast implants, now latex allergy law suits are appearing. I work occasionally as a legal secretary and litigation in latex allergy is increasing. The poor 260-balloon has already been outlawed in most pediatric hospitals in the United States now maybe latex gloves and our props.

When I saw Dr. Tom "Tempo" Poulton's letter to *Laugh Makers Magazine* <sup>11</sup> I immediately contacted him. He is collecting information from anyone who may have latex problems with balloons. Here is part of his letter and a response to my inquiry as to the nature of latex allergies.

"Part of our responsibility as children's entertainers is not to give balloons to the very young and to be certain to caution parents about the potential risks to younger siblings. There have been several reported cases each year in this country of very young children putting balloons or parts of balloons in their mouths and suffering choking or asphyxiation. This extraordinarily rare event probably affects no more than a few children in the entire United States each year. Nonetheless, some 'children's advocates' believe the latest thrust of information dealing with latex allergies tends in the minds of many health care workers to reinforce the generally "dangerous" perception of balloons.

"It is important for balloon workers to understand that there are rare children and adults who have a true allergy to latex or component used in its manufacture. For those individuals, contact with latex can be dangerous. Rarely, contact with latex in such individuals could produce a life threatening acute allergic reaction. Sensitization to latex can occur either by surface contact with skin or mucous membranes or by inhaling of latex powder present in the atmosphere when balloons or latex items such as surgical gloves are stretched and snapped.

"Patients who are known to be latex allergic will have 'latex allergy' or 'latex precautions' prominently posted in their room, near their bed, and on their arm bands. Most latex allergic persons are actually health care workers. For them and most other latex allergic persons, there is a rash on exposure of skin to latex. Many such patients also have mild or moderate asthmatic symptoms upon exposure (coughing, wheezing). Rarely, it can cause a severe, even life-threatening anaphylactic response. It can affect the elderly, but most allergic response weakens in the geriatric population, including this one."

Recently there was a report in the Washington Post Health supplement concerning damage to the lungs from blowing up balloons. I sent this to Dr. Poulton and asked his opinion.

"It is formally called subcutaneous emphysema which simply means 'air under the skin'. This is reported to occur from time to time in people who blow very hard playing a musical instrument. What happens is that pressure in the lung, trachea, and bronchi is so high that a little tear or leak develops, air escapes, and makes its way along the bronchi and trachea until it reaches the skin. It is not very dangerous, although it's quite uncomfortable. This more commonly occurs within the lungs of intensive care patients, especially premature infants who are being mechanically ventilated.

"This is certainly no routine risk for the average person blowing up a balloon. Those with chronic obstructive lung disease/ emphysema of the lungs would be at much greater risk. Someone with significant emphysema would have little hope of inflating a 260 by mouth to begin with!

If you personally have been involved or know of someone who has developed latex allergies or other affliction requiring modification or cessation of balloon work please contact Dr. Poulton. He continues, "It is important that we be honest and forthright in dealing with issues such as these when they arise, but it is equally important that we have the facts at hand to reply firmly in a manner which enables us to support reality rather than unfavorable perceptions not based in fact."

Tom "Teppo" Poulton, M.D., Professor and Chairman  
Department of Anesthesiology, Fletcher Allen Health Care

2010 update



This article was written in 1997. Ten years later to my knowledge there are no hospitals in the USA that allow latex balloons. The hospital I work at doesn't have a latex glove in the hospital. (Except for the rare ones used in surgery)

It has been told to me that children who are hospitalized are exposed to latex in catheter and other procedural equipment where latex is the only substance used.

Also and not to be underestimated there are thousand of products that children play with that have latex ingredients. Anything that is pliable like rubber usually contains latex. (One hospital even asked the clowns not to wear Pro Noses as the glue they use contains latex (not the pro nose).

For more accurate descriptions please see:

[www.aaaai.org](http://www.aaaai.org) ACAAI American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology

Guidelines for the Management of Latex Allergies and Safe Latex Use in Health Care Facilities