

# Student activists point the way

## Four nursing students speak out for retractable needles



**MAKING A POINT** It's time for our health authorities to start paying attention to what these nursing students have to say about retractable needles. Back row, from left, Skye LeGuerrier, Vanessa Holmen and Erin Senger. Front row, Sarah Kuntsi.

**FOUR UBC-OKANAGAN NURSING SCHOOL STUDENTS** have a lot to teach the health authorities and WorkSafe BC about needlestick injuries.

The concerned classmates – Erin Senger, Vanessa Holmen, Skye LeGuerrier and Sarah Kuntsi – are promoting awareness of needlestick injuries as part of their fourth-year curriculum. They want province-wide regulations making retractable needles and other safety-engineered medical devices mandatory for all British Columbians.

Their school project isn't just an academic exercise. Three of the four students have already suffered accidental needlestick injuries – even though they won't graduate until next May.

The four are spreading the word throughout the Okanagan about the need to replace unsafe needles and other dangerous sharps with retractable needles and other safety-engineered medical devices.

They've created a display with a variety of retractable needles and other safety products, which they've shown at Kelowna General and Penticton Regional hospitals to nurses, other health care workers and the public.

They've also already attracted several positive stories in the media. LeGuerrier told the *Penticton Herald* recently about being stuck by a scalpel left on a surgical tray: "Actually, I didn't report it the first day. But when I went home and told my fiancé that I got stuck and asked 'what are we going to do for the next six months, or a year, until I know for sure whether I'm clean?' I decided to report it.

"It affects a lot of people. It doesn't just affect me. It affects the people that care about me and the other people that could be affected if I was infected."

The students don't agree with BC health minister George Abbott's claim that province-wide regulations aren't needed because the six health authorities are developing their own plans to reduce needlestick injuries. "Regulations won't be effective if each health authority has different rules and different equipment," says Kuntsi.

"We also want the regulations to specify retractable needles," says Senger. "They cost more, but are much safer than other needles now being used by some health authorities."

Each year some 6,800 BC hospital workers are injured and sometimes infected by blood-borne diseases such as HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis B and C. Those injuries cost BC taxpayers \$13.6 million annually for testing and treatment. Studies show that BC could save \$8 million annually by banning conventional needles.

The students support BCNU's push for province-wide regulations and say they really appreciate the help they've received from Okanagan-Similkameen regional chair Myrna Allison and lobbyist Kevin Barry.

"We're just happy to be part of the campaign to end these senseless injuries," says Holmen. □