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HEALTH: Nurse charged with infecting patients

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Jon Dale Jones, a nurse anesthesiologist working in a Miami area hospital, has been arrested in Miami, suspected of intentionally infecting 15 patients with potentially deadly hepatitis C at an army hospital in Texas.

The federal indictment accuses Jones of assaulting six patients in 2004 and illegally acquiring a controlled substance, a strong pain killer called fentanyl, which is often used in surgery and is reported to be 80 times more powerful than morphine.

Clark Harmonson, an El Paso attorney who has filed a civil lawsuit, said Jones contracted hepatitis C while working at the Beaumont Army Medical Center.

The disease is spread through blood-to-blood contact. The lawyer alleges that Jones injected himself with the painkiller before injecting patients with the same needles. "Basically, there's no other way it could have happened," Harmonson said.

Hepatitis C can destroy the liver. An investigation by the Centers for Disease Control found that 15 patients were infected from July 31 through Oct. 12, 2004. Jones was the only staff member with hepatitis C known to be in the operating room with all 15 patients, Harmonson said.

Jones' attorney, Ed O'Donnell, said his client "absolutely" maintains his innocence. Since the allegations came to light, Jones has informed the state boards that govern health practitioners about them, O'Donnell said.

Jones has been working through a staffing agency for hospitals in Virginia, the District of Columbia, Hawaii and Miami, O'Donnell said. He wasn't certain where Jones worked in Miami.

Jones was arrested at 6 a.m. March 6, by an FBI agent, court records show. Earlier this week, he was released on a \$200,000 bond, \$20,000 of which was paid, cosigned by his wife, on condition that he not work as a nurse anesthetist and not have access to or possess narcotics.

