

## SPSO decision report

**Case:** 201102504, Scottish Ambulance Service  
**Sector:** health  
**Subject:** failure to send ambulance/delay in sending ambulance  
**Outcome:** some upheld, recommendations

### Summary

Mr A had abdominal pain in the early hours one morning. The pain had been present the previous day, but had got much worse. Mr A's wife (Mrs C) contacted the ambulance service for assistance, but they did not send an ambulance so Mrs C took her husband to hospital. Mr A had acute appendicitis (sudden inflammation of the appendix). His appendix was removed that afternoon. He was discharged from hospital seven days later. Mrs C complained that the service failed to attend when she called them for Mr A, and did not deal with her complaints appropriately.

We did not uphold Mrs C's complaint that an ambulance was not sent. We took advice from one of our medical advisers, who said that Mr A's condition was not detrimentally affected by not being taken to hospital by ambulance, and that the decision not to send an ambulance was correct in terms of the service's protocol. We listened to the telephone call and reviewed the service's records and procedures together with information provided by Mrs C. We decided that although the emergency medical dispatcher's communication with Mrs C was not as helpful as it could have been, the decision not to send an ambulance was reasonable in the circumstances.

We upheld Mrs C's other complaint. We found that she received a response to her complaint after eight weeks, which was longer than the 20 working days the service aimed to work to, and she was not updated with an explanation of why there was a delay. We found evidence that service staff disagreed on who was responsible for sending the update. Our adviser thought that because the service's review of Mrs C's call focused on technical aspects, rather than taking a holistic view that included Mrs C's experience, it lacked any real empathy with her situation. Their investigation report recommended that Mrs C be given a more detailed explanation of the reasons for not sending an ambulance, but we noted that this was not provided.

### Recommendations

We recommended that the service:

- review this call with the emergency medical dispatcher involved, and ensure that they receive appropriate support for their customer care skills to achieve the standard aspired to in the service's 999 procedure;
- review how they respond to complaints relating to incidents where callers dispute the outcome, such as this case, to ensure that investigations and responses acknowledge and take into account the service user's experience, rather than being solely driven by compliance with protocol; and
- ensure all staff dealing with complaints know who is responsible for updating complainants at particular stages of the complaints process.