

SPSO decision report

Case: 201403815, A Medical Practice in the Fife NHS Board area
Sector: health
Subject: clinical treatment / diagnosis
Outcome: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Mrs C complained about the standard of medical care she received when she reported a cough to the medical practice. She said that she reported a persistent cough on two occasions but was not referred for a chest x-ray. At a third consultation, seven months after Mrs C first reported her cough, a locum GP referred her for a chest x-ray and, after further tests, Mrs C was diagnosed with lung cancer.

We took independent medical advice from one of our GP advisers. We found that the practice missed two opportunities to arrange for Mrs C to have a chest x-ray as part of their routine investigations into a persistent cough. We found that the practice failed to reasonably follow the national referral guidance for suspected cancer which all GPs should be aware of and which clarify the significance of a cough in the diagnosis of lung cancer and state that a time-frame of three weeks should be considered a persistent cough.

When Mrs C first reported the cough it had been present for eight weeks, and when she next mentioned the cough it had been present for 13 weeks. The criteria for referral for suspected cancer had been met on both occasions. We found that Mrs C should have been sent for a chest x-ray earlier than she was, so we upheld her complaint, and made a number of recommendations.

Recommendations

We recommended that the practice:

- apologise to Mrs C and her family for the distress caused by the late arrangement of investigations into the cause of her cough;
- notify the board's clinical support group and ask them to consider whether to undertake a random review of patient consultation records for quality assurance purposes; and
- carry out a reflective significant event analysis with support from the board's clinical support group and provide us with a copy.