

SPSO decision report



Case: 201809545, A Medical Practice in the Highland NHS Board Area
Sector: Health
Subject: Clinical treatment / diagnosis
Decision: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Mr C complained that the practice failed to provide his late wife (Mrs A) with reasonable care and treatment.

Mrs A had presented to the practice several times with severe back pain over a ten month period. Mrs A was told to self refer for physiotherapy. Mrs A subsequently went to A&E due to the pain she was suffering in her back. Mrs A was diagnosed with renal cancer which had spread to her spinal column and brain. Mrs A died from her illness.

We took independent advice from a GP and a nurse. We found that although the practice doctors had been involved in prescribing painkillers and muscle relaxants to Mrs A, her back pain management and treatment plan was effectively being managed by the physiotherapy service who are independent practitioners. It was reasonable for a GP to expect that if a physiotherapist was concerned about deteriorating or urgent clinical signs in a patient that they would arrange appropriate hospital assessment or a scan. Mrs A had at no stage when she saw the practice doctors presented with red flag signs (indicators that a more serious problem may be developing/underlying) to suggest cancer. As such, the care provided by the practice doctors was reasonable.

We found that with regard to Mrs A's consultations with the advanced nurse practitioner, she had presented with potential red flag signs including unexplained weight loss. While Mrs A's presenting symptoms were very atypical of renal cancer, it had not appeared that cancer had been considered given Mrs A had shown potential red flag symptoms and signs. We found that these red flag symptoms and signs had not been acted upon. Therefore, we upheld the complaint.

We acknowledged that the practice in their complaint response to Mrs A and to this office accepted there were failings by the practice. They said they had learnt from Mrs A's case and we acknowledged the action the practice had taken to address this.

Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Apologise to Mr C for the failure to identify that Mrs A had presented with red flag symptoms and signs for cancer at consultations with the Advanced Nurse Practitioner and to take appropriate action. The apology should meet the standards set out in the SPSO guidelines on apology available at www.spsso.org.uk/information-leaflets.

What we said should change to put things right in future:

- Relevant staff should be aware of the local and national guidelines on presentations with acute and chronic back pain and ensure they are up-to-date with current best local and national practice, including red flag presentations.

We have asked the organisation to provide us with evidence that they have implemented the recommendations we have made on this case by the deadline we set.