

SPSO decision report

Case: 201301946, A Medical Practice in the Grampian NHS Board area
Sector: health
Subject: clinical treatment / diagnosis
Outcome: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Mr C's late wife (Mrs C) had cancer and was terminally ill. After one of their daughters phoned the medical practice, a GP prescribed a strong morphine-based liquid painkiller. The family also phoned community services, and a community nurse visited Mrs C at home the following week. A few days later, another phone consultation was held with another GP who ordered an electrocardiogram (a test that measures the electrical activity of the heart). Further visits were made by a community nurse and the family agreed that a 'just in case' box (containing medicines that may be needed to help relieve a patient's unpleasant or distressing symptoms while being looked after at home) should be provided. Early the following month, one of Mrs C's daughters was concerned about her condition and spoke to the duty GP at the medical practice, who advised the family to use painkillers and said that Mrs C would be reviewed the following week. When a GP then visited Mrs C at home, they noted that she was at the terminal stage of her illness, and Mrs C died later that day.

Mr C complained about the way that GPs at the medical practice dealt with Mrs C's medical problems, saying that they did not visit and relied on the community nurses instead. He said that his wife was in severe pain and great distress. For four weeks she was not examined by a doctor and additional medication was not prescribed, as the community nurse was not able to prescribe medication. The family accepted that a 'just in case' box was in the house, but Mr C said that they did not know at what point to give Mrs C the medication and that a GP should have provided an explanation.

We took independent advice from one of our medical advisers, after which we upheld the complaint. We found that the medication and explanation provided were reasonable but that, by not visiting Mrs C, the practice failed to provide her with a reasonable standard of care. This led to a great deal of distress for her family, and made a very difficult time worse for them during the final stages of her illness. The adviser also said that while there was evidence that use of the 'just in case' box was explained to the family, it would have been reasonable for this to have been reinforced and for staff to have checked that the family understood what to do.

Recommendations

We recommended that the practice:

- review their management of patients with advanced cancer in light of our adviser's comments; and
- apologise to Mr C for the failures identified.