

Scottish Parliament Region: South of Scotland

Case 200502326: A Medical Practice, Dumfries and Galloway NHS Board

Summary of Investigation

Category

Health: Family Health Services; Clinical Treatment (Well Woman Clinic)

Overview

The complainant (Ms C) raised a complaint that she visited her General Medical Practice's Well Woman Clinic and a smear test was carried out without a reasonable degree of care.

Specific complaint and conclusion

The complaint which has been investigated is that a smear test was performed without a reasonable degree of care (*not upheld*).

Recommendations

The Ombudsman has made no recommendations.

Main Investigation Report

Introduction

1. On 2 December 2003 the complainant (Ms C) visited her General Medical Practice (the Practice) to attend a Well Woman Clinic for a cervical smear test. Ms C complained that the examination was carried out in a rough and insensitive manner and resulted in her being scratched during the procedure. Ms C said that she sustained a deep scratch that bled for five days.

2. The complaint from Ms C which I have investigated is that a smear test was performed without a reasonable degree of care.

Investigation

3. I have read the information provided to me from Ms C and I have had access to clinical records from the Practice and a copy of their letter responding to the complaint. I have also received advice from an Adviser (the Adviser), who has considerable experience as a Practice Nurse and is also a specialist in the field of gynaecology.

4. I have not included in this report every detail investigated but I am satisfied that no matter of significance has been overlooked. Ms C and the Practice were given an opportunity to comment on a draft of this report.

Complaint: A smear test was performed without a reasonable degree of care

5. Ms C attended a prearranged appointment on 2 December 2003 at the surgery and had a smear test carried out by the Practice Nurse. Ms C was extremely unhappy about that experience. She has told me that she suffered bleeding for five days afterwards, and attributed this to a scratch that she believed she sustained during the procedure. She believed that the speculum used was too large and that she was roughly treated.

6. The Practice Nurse noted in the clinical record that this was a difficult sample to obtain. In response to my enquiries, the Practice confirmed that, under normal circumstances, a disposable speculum is used and if it is a difficult sample to obtain, a small speculum would normally be used. They were unable to confirm, however, what size of speculum was used at that appointment.

7. The Adviser provided comment and information about the procedure that should be followed and the appropriate choice of instrument that should be available for the procedure and that should be used. Extracts of an example of this type of procedure are attached in Appendix 3. There are four sizes of speculum that can be used to carry out the procedure. The choice that is made depends on certain factors that will relate to the individual circumstances of the patient. Most commonly, a medium speculum is used.

8. Details of the procedure should be fully explained to the patient prior to commencement of the examination. The procedure is then carried out ensuring as little discomfort as possible. The Adviser has indicated that some patients do find this to be an uncomfortable procedure and bleeding may result if an existing condition is present, such as the presence of a polyp. However, there should be no bleeding from the vaginal wall. The examination is followed by the nurse recording any matters of significance in the clinical record. In this case, a record was made and the Practice Manager confirmed, when I asked, that the sample was difficult to obtain.

9. Following the appointment on 2 December 2003, Ms C did not return to the Practice for further advice or treatment nor did she seek treatment elsewhere. Although Ms C has explained that she complained to the Practice on 9 December 2003, they did not receive her letter. She has told me that she did not wish further contact with the Practice, and this understandably may have prevented her from following up the matter. However, because she did not then ask why her first letter had not been answered, they were unaware of her complaint and did not have a chance to reply until after Ms C contacted the Ombudsman in November 2005. This was some two years after the appointment took place. The complaint was responded to on 29 December 2005 after the Practice Manager looked into it. He confirmed that the medical record written by the Practice Nurse at the time of the appointment indicates it was a difficult sample to take. The written records do not, however, indicate that bleeding was evident at the time the sample was taken.

Conclusion

10. As Ms C did not have her injury examined at the time, there is no medical evidence to suggest or confirm that she sustained an injury as a result of the procedure. Additionally, there is nothing in the records that indicates that blood was seen by the Practice Nurse when she carried out the procedure. I have, therefore, been unable to establish that the concern Ms C has raised was linked

to this visit to the Well Woman Clinic. It is always difficult to establish what happened at such an event where only two individuals were involved, and it is even more difficult to do so two years after that event.

11. The records show that the Practice Nurse experienced a degree of difficulty in obtaining the sample. However, I cannot infer from this that she did not exercise a reasonable degree of care when doing so. It is most unfortunate that Ms C found this experience so unpleasant but as this matter was not fully followed-up at the time the only clear evidence on which I can base my view is that in the written records. On the evidence that is available to me, therefore, I do not uphold this complaint.

12. I accept the comment made by the Adviser that this can be an uncomfortable procedure, and I note that the complaint response to Ms C from the Practice included an apology for any discomfort she may have suffered. The Practice have indicated that in the future they will ensure that patients know that if they have any concerns they should arrange an appointment with a member of staff to discuss it. I commend them for this action.

Recommendation

13. The Ombudsman has made no recommendation.

20 June 2007

Explanation of abbreviations used

Ms C	The complainant
The Practice	The general medical practice where Ms C attended
The Adviser	Independent Professional Adviser

Glossary of terms

Cervical Smear

The cervical smear test is a screening test which allows doctors to predict those women who are likely to develop cancer of the neck of the womb (carcinoma of the cervix) in time to prevent it developing

Multiparous

Having had two or more pregnancies

Polyp

A growth protruding from a mucus membrane

Procedure for taking a Cervical Smear (C/S)

These are extracts of a procedure identified by the Independent Adviser as a type that would generally be followed within the NHS. A specific procedure may vary between practices and be adapted according to particular need.

'It is not usual to cause pain when taking a C/S, although some patients do find it uncomfortable. Bleeding may occur from the cervical opening due to its vascularity or the pressure of a polyp, but not from the vaginal wall.

On completion of the procedure, the patient is told she may get dressed, when she can expect a result and reassured that her cervix looked normal (to the eye).

A record is made in the patient's paper notes and/or on the computer. If the patient had found the procedure particularly painful or if the nurse found the procedure particularly difficult to perform, this would be noted and in the case of pain the patient would be advised to see the GP as this could be the sign of another problem.

There are four sizes of Cuscoes speculum, used as follows:

A large speculum	For a multiparous woman who has had a number of vaginal deliveries On finding a vaginal prolapse
A medium speculum	For most other patients
A small speculum	For tense patients and some post menopausal patients
A virginal speculum	Used for vaginal examination, rarely for C/S'