

Patient Safety Learning Advisory

Patient Safety Event:

Failure to Recognize Deteriorating Health Status

Why was this a Critical Incident? What happened?

Harm occurred because of a delay in communication of blood test results, and treatment of worsening kidney function.

Blood tests were ordered by an on-call physician. The abnormal results were not communicated effectively to the physician in charge of the patient's care.

What is the Health Care System learning?

The requisition for blood tests did not identify additional physicians that required the results

The process to contact physicians for a call-back varied according to preference. The request for a physician to contact the facility was not sent by the preferred method and was not received.

Shift handover did not include that a physician had not been contacted with the abnormal blood test results.

There was a delay in scheduled rounds. The client's worsening health was not recognized, and the client needed to be sent to a different facility for a higher level of care.

The National Early Warning Score (NEWS) is a standard tool that may have helped to identify the patient's worsening health condition earlier.

What are the recommendations?

Communicate the importance of indicating on lab requisitions where test results are to be sent so all applicable healthcare providers receive a copy.

Share the learning of this review with departments involved for quality improvement purposes.

Limit variations in practices based on preferences. Recommend that private clinics receive messages in the same way, with electronic prompts to ensure consistent communication.

Implement a policy to ensure clear and consistent transfer of information when care is transferred from one healthcare provider to another.

Explore implementation of a standard tool (for example NEWS) in Long Term Care to help identify and respond when client health condition worsens.

Keywords: lab results, creatinine, deterioration, communication, shift handover, information transfer, NEWS

Glossary:

Requisition - an order that is used by health professionals to request laboratory tests such as blood tests.

Shift handover - the transfer of responsibility of some or all care for a patient to another responsible healthcare provider, including the process of communication that ensures safety and continuity of care.

National Early Warning Score (NEWS) – tool that scores vital sign measurements, such as blood pressure and pulse. With the score results, staff can recognize and communicate worsening of health condition. Healthcare teams can then implement system responses, such as increasing frequency of assessments or consulting specialties.

Your privacy is important to us, so in this summary we have removed any details which would help identify the subject of this event. It's important that we can learn from safety events and make changes to improve the care we provide.