

Case Study: Abuse of Prescription Medication

Background

This is the case of a 47yr old male patient who transferred to Practice X in August 2014. The patient was already on a repeat prescription facility for a very high dose of Fentanyl by transdermal patch delivery.

On 10th August 2016 he died unexpectedly and after submitting a preliminary report to the Coroner the practice were informed that there would be an inquest into his death. The inquest took place on 21st September 2017.

In-house Case Review

The practice conducted an in-house case review shortly after the patient's death and a further detailed review was undertaken in advance of the Inquest at which one of our doctors was called to give evidence.

Coroners Court

The deceased patient was found dead with a Fentanyl patch in his mouth and it was suspected that he had been abusing the prescription drug and had inadvertently overdosed. The Coroner subsequently recorded a 'Drug related Death' as the cause of death.

At the inquest it was revealed to court that the deceased had been in the habit of misusing Fentanyl for many years. He had fabricated many stories about his condition, even to those closest to him and to health professional in different fields.

Practice Reflections on the Case:

The initial Case Review was conducted in house within a week of his death and discussed at the next clinical meeting of the GPs on 12th September 2016

We reviewed our service activity and contacts with the patient to assess if there might be any learning points.

It was felt that:

- We had given appropriate scrutiny to the patients' prescription requests.
- We had concerns about the patients' true analgesic requirements – had questioned this and had on more than one occasion requested an inpatient admission to establish the patients' analgesia needs (– this was declined by two consultants citing a lack of beds.)
- We had reviewed the patient in surgery appropriately to assess his analgesia use and patch sites.
- The patient was informed about the dangers of misuse of his medications

Information was revealed in court which we would not have been able to get prior to the patients' death, specifically the history revealed by his ex-wife that the patient was in the habit of misusing

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Fentanyl by taking it buccally/orally, and had done so routinely for recreational purposes for at least 9 years.

Reflections on the Coroners Advice

The only point of consideration that Coroner suggested to us at the end of the inquest was that, with a previous history of Heroin misuse, the patient may have been more pre-disposed to the abuse of prescription medications than average.

He suggested we should think about the possibility of mis-use in all cases of patients taking Fentanyl who had a history of other drug abuse in the past.

This suggestion was discussed between the doctors at the practice within a week of the Inquest and noted, although it was felt by us all that cases like this of deliberate deception are difficult to manage or assess outside of a controlled environment.