

Dr Tony Luxton

DRUGS: PRESCRIBING, ADMINISTRATION, REVIEW and RECORDING

Background

The investigation has revolved around the process of drug prescription and the evolving clinical governance environment in which it takes place. Medicines, delivered by syringe driver, were used in such a way as to attract complaint from the relatives of those who died and others whose formal reports on the deceased have been made available to CHI (but not yet to the Trust). One geriatrician also reported finding that a patient recovering from surgery for fractured femur was receiving diamorphine by syringe driver and only became alert enough to respond to rehabilitation after the drug was stopped, recovering enough to return home.

Prescribing

Certain medicines, notably diamorphine, haloperidol and midazolam were apparently used without sufficient cause, in doses and combinations which could adversely affect frail patients and in a way that involved increases in dosage until death. The conduct of one particular doctor has been under police investigation and the General Medical Council and at the time of writing no decisions about further action or extending the investigation have been reached.

During the visit it was clear that great efforts had been made to compile policies governing prescribing for pain and the use of syringe drivers and to familiarise staff with them. Palliative Care guidelines were in general use and medical and nursing staff regularly sought help from the Palliative Care Team. Day to day prescribing and clinical care is now undertaken by a Staff Grade physician in post for 14 months.

Data for 1999, 2000 and 2001 from the Chief Pharmacist indicate a sharp reduction in the supply of injectable diamorphine, haloperidol and midazolam to Daedalus and Dryad wards over these three years.

Anecdotal information from some interviewees suggested that an atmosphere of extra caution might be leading to under-use of these drugs with patients being unnecessarily in pain, either because staff were reluctant to prescribe or patients themselves were declining pain relief.

Administration

Whilst the legal responsibility of prescribing rests with the prescriber, hospital prescribing involves others for example nurses who administer medication and pharmacists who deliver stocks to the ward and review the charts at intervals. All are subject to a legal framework governing drug use, professional regulation and clinical policies which guide practice with regard to the use of medicines for certain conditions and other clinical governance arrangements.

Regular training for nurses using syringe drivers is available and staff are aware of policies.

Review

The employment of a Staff Grade doctor has provided the opportunity for better continuity of care and we are told it is normal practice for him to review medication. Furthermore consultant staff are also involved with the review of medication during ward rounds. Nursing staff are more attuned to the need to monitor and record symptoms to guide them as they administer "as required, or prn" medicines, and to discuss changes in condition and the treatments used to provide symptom relief with relatives or significant others.

Recording

Staff are aware of the requirement for accurate completion of prescription charts. Nurses declare a willingness and commitment to remedy any drug prescription errors by referring back to a doctor. Pharmacy staff collect data measuring drug use by ward and record pharmacy intervention and outcome. These measures provide the tools to ensure that prescribing remains as error free as possible.

Comment

The production of policies, willingness to secure outside advice and second opinions, the education opportunities, and the sharp reduction in consumption of the three drugs in question all suggest improvement.

The Trust and CHI need to verify that these improvements have truly fed through to individual patient care by arranging an audit of case notes of patients treated after the strengthened prescribing and associated clinical governance arrangements were established.

Tony Luxton

13th January 02