

Letter from Glasgow

LANARKSHIRE'S HEPATITIS C PATIENT NOTIFICATION EXERCISE

They say any publicity is good publicity but I would venture that no organization wishes to be in the media's gaze for the wrong reasons. And that is what it felt like when Lanarkshire was faced with the headline 'Hepatitis alert for 8000 UK patients' on the BBC website, and in the *Daily Record* (a popular Scottish newspaper) with its 'Health scare: Over 7000 Lanarkshire patients at risk after healthcare worker diagnosed with hepatitis C'.^{1,2}

The situation arose as a result of a healthcare worker employed by NHS Lanarkshire, the health board for which I work and which serves over 650 000 people in west central Scotland, being detected to have hepatitis C infection. This first came to light in 2008 and at that point a detailed investigation was undertaken to establish whether there had been any transmission of hepatitis C to patients by the healthcare worker. In the investigation NHS Lanarkshire worked closely with Health Protection Scotland (HPS), Scotland's health protection agency, which supports the 14 Scottish territorial health boards.³ HPS provides specialist support and expertise in infectious diseases and environmental hazards and as such is invaluable to health boards. A report was produced and this was considered by the UK Advisory Panel on Healthcare Workers Infected with Blood Borne Viruses (UKAP).⁴ UKAP is part of Public Health England but provides advice to the four countries in the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) on healthcare workers infected with blood-borne viruses (HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C). UKAP also supports local incident management teams (IMTs) and maintains a register of infected healthcare workers in the UK.

Following the report on the 2008 incident, UKAP advised NHS Lanarkshire that there was no need for a look back study (patient notification exercise), i.e. identifying, contacting and offering testing to patients who may have been thought to be at-risk if they were treated by the healthcare worker who had hepatitis C. A look back exercise, or patient notification exercise as we termed it in Lanarkshire, is usually undertaken following exposure or suspected exposure, for example, to blood-borne viruses or tuberculosis by patients in a healthcare setting.⁵ Hawker *et al.* describe the purpose of such exercises is to determine those at risk of the communicable disease, inform those individuals about the risk, determine who may be infected, prevent further transmission of the communicable disease, provide appropriate investigation, treatment and care, and use information gathered during the exercise to increase the evidence base about exposure risks.⁵

In Lanarkshire the situation of not undertaking a patient notification exercise changed in 2015 when two patients were identified by NHS Lanarkshire who were linked to the healthcare worker. An assessment was made of all the information, including the epidemiological and virological evidence, for the two patients. The conclusion was there was probably healthcare worker-to-patient transmission of hepatitis C infection during surgery. Given this new information, a further report was submitted by NHS Lanarkshire to UKAP. The changed circumstances meant that this time UKAP agreed with a proposal by NHS Lanarkshire that a patient notification exercise be undertaken.

The exercise was overseen by a multidisciplinary, multi-agency IMT. It involved over 8000 patients who had been treated by the healthcare worker during the time of employment by NHS

Lanarkshire. Since some patients have been treated many years previously, some had died and others had moved house. Therefore, an up-to-date database was required for the exercise. In Scotland we are lucky in that every patient registered with a general practitioner (GP) has a unique patient identifier called the Community Health Index (CHI) which can be used to identify patients. Consequently, we were able to exclude patients who had died and also track patients who had moved to other health boards in Scotland, or moved to addresses elsewhere in the UK. For a small proportion of patients, no forwarding addresses were available.

The preparations for the exercise were considerable, added as it was to staff's normal duties and required several weeks of planning. This included setting up additional clinics for testing, training staff, preparing information leaflets including 'frequently asked questions', preparing the letters to be sent to patients, preparing media statements and arrangements for a press conference, preparing a telephone response line, and ensuring websites were ready with the appropriate information. We also learned from the experience of other similar incidents including in Wales.⁶ In that patient notification exercise over 3000 patients were contacted following a healthcare worker was found to have hepatitis C and had worked in obstetrics and gynaecology.

In Lanarkshire, the patient notification exercise went live on Tuesday, 23 February 2016 with a press conference. Letters were sent to 8383 patients in Lanarkshire, other parts of Scotland and other UK countries. The first batch of letters was timed to be delivered the day after the press conference. A total of 125 clinics were held in 10 locations across Lanarkshire from 25 February to 17 March and involved 150 members of staff from primary care, secondary care and public health. The quotes at the start of this Letter highlight examples of the media coverage of the exercise. Despite the sensitive nature of the exercise, there were relatively few complaints received regarding the exercise.

A key aspect of the exercise was that the healthcare worker's identity was not disclosed by NHS Lanarkshire because of our duty of care to the healthcare worker and the worker's family. In addition NHS Lanarkshire has kept all those involved, including the two patients who probably acquired the infection from the healthcare worker, informed of our plans as the exercise progressed.

With regard to patients taking up the offer of hepatitis C testing, the figure for Lanarkshire residents was 77% (5656 of 7311 Lanarkshire residents who were sent a letter were tested). This is good compared with some exercises in which uptake rates have been under 50%. There have been no further cases of probable infection by the healthcare worker to patients identified in the exercise. Five patients tested hepatitis C virus-negative, with 3 being antibody-positive and 2 being antibody-equivocal. However, as these patients do not have hepatitis C virus it is not possible to carry out further virological testing. As expected, the exercise identified other patients (7 in total) with chronic hepatitis C infection that were unrelated to the healthcare worker. These patients have received the appropriate investigation, treatment, care and follow-up.

At the time of writing, a report is being prepared which will be submitted to UKAP. UKAP will consider the findings of the Lanarkshire exercise and make its findings known in due course. The exercise had a considerable impact on the health board and

the public health department in Lanarkshire. However, I hope that not inconsiderable work undertaken in Lanarkshire will help UKAP inform future policy, and help other health authorities that need to undertake similar patient notification exercises.

REFERENCES

- 1 BBC website. Hepatitis C alert for 8000 UK surgical patients. Available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-35639826 (accessed on 31 Aug 2016).
- 2 Health scare: Over 7000 Lanarkshire patients at risk after healthcare worker diagnosed with hepatitis C. *Daily Record. Glasgow, 23 February 2016*. Available at www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/health-scare-over-7000-lanarkshire-7423573 (accessed on 31 Aug 2016).
- 3 Health Protection Scotland. Available at www.hps.scot.nhs.uk (accessed on 31 Aug 2016).
- 4 UK Advisory Panel on Healthcare Workers Infected with Blood Borne Viruses (UKAP). Available at www.gov.uk/government/groups/uk-advisory-panel-for-healthcare-workers-infected-with-bloodborne-viruses (accessed on 31 Aug 2016).
- 5 Hawker J, Begg N, Blair I, Reintjes R, Weinberg J, Ekdahl K. *Communicable disease control and health protection handbook, 3rd ed*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell; 2012.
- 6 Public Health England. Press release: UK-wide hepatitis C look back exercise commences; 11 September 2011. Available at www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-wide-hepatitis-c-look-back-exercise-commences (accessed on 31 Aug 2016).

HARPREET S. KOHLI

*Director of Public Health and Health Policy
NHS Lanarkshire Headquarters
Kirklands
Fallside Road
Bothwell
Scotland
harpreet.kohli@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk*