

Question for the Oral Examination 2002

As Medical Director of a teaching hospital, you receive an adverse incident report describing a grossly hyponatraemic (low serum sodium) patient, a labourer aged 50, who became tetraplegic after being given hypertonic saline in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU).

You proceed to interview the consultant anaesthetist in charge of the case and manage to establish the following facts:-

- a) The clinical diagnosis was accurate and hypertonic saline was indicated.
- b) The junior doctor prescribed the hypertonic saline, but unfortunately the flow rate was three times faster than the appropriate rate.
- c) The patient developed complication within 24 hours manifesting as irreversible tetraplegia.
- d) The consultant was only consulted over the phone; he had not seen the patient until after the complication has developed.
- e) The patient's family has so far been kept in the dark.
- f) The patient remains in ICU.

Describe the key issues, and discuss how you would manage the incident.

Key Points

A. Key issues include the following:

- i. Moral and ethical
 - patient's right to know vs being kept in the dark.
- ii. Risk management
 - protecting the institution from financial & reputational risk.
 - root cause analysis to prevent similar incident from happening again
 - cultivate "no blame" culture.
- iii. Medico-legal
 - fair compensation to victim.
- iv. Human resource management
 - supervision of junior staff.
 - continuous professional development / continuous medical education.
- v. Public relations
 - proactive media management.

B. Incident Management

- i. Guiding Framework
 - Morally and ethically, the patient and his relatives must not be kept in the dark.
 - At the same time, there is a need to initiate actions to protect the teaching hospital from financial and reputational risk.
- ii. Actions focusing on the patient
 - Convene a meeting with the teaching hospital's lawyer and insurance representative.
 - Determine early that this is a non-defensible case.
 - Decide on how best compensate the family and avoid lengthy legal proceedings.

- Ensure the patient receives good quality medical & rehabilitative care in the hospital.
 - Formulate a plan to discuss with family with a view to arrive at a negotiated settlement (with agreement from insurer)
- iii. Actions focusing on the case
- Initiate root cause analysis.
 - Implement lessons learnt (system improvement, educational initiatives etc).
 - Prompt reporting of the case worth highlighting.
- iv. Actions focusing on staff management
- Review hospital procedure of supervising junior doctors.
 - Review work hours issues.
 - Review CPD/CME issues.
 - Any disciplinary measures required.
- v. Actions focusing on potential media reporting
- Consider lines to take.
 - Identify one media person as the key spokesperson.