

Open Book

Learning from close calls and adverse events

Safe discharge processes – norovirus

This report aims to alert providers to key findings of a recent review, and highlights changes put in place to stop such an event happening again. We advise providers to consider whether the changes made are relevant to their own systems.

This report is relevant to:

- infection prevention and control staff
- aged residential care facility clinical managers
- chief medical officers and directors of nursing.

Incident

An elderly patient with complex needs and recent vomiting and diarrhoea was discharged from a community facility where there was a norovirus outbreak. The patient was subsequently transferred between other private and community facilities before being placed in permanent accommodation.

The risk of norovirus transfer was not communicated to relevant staff or to the private and community facilities, thus placing people at risk of exposure to infection. However, no further infections occurred.

Chronology

- Mrs A was admitted to a rest home for respite care until more suitable permanent accommodation could be found.
- During her stay, there was a norovirus outbreak affecting patients and staff, including Mrs A.
- A memorandum about the outbreak was circulated widely among local medical facilities and the community.
- It became apparent that Mrs A urgently needed higher-level care than the rest home could provide. DHB staff who arranged community placements were notified of this, but not about the norovirus outbreak, nor that Mrs A had diarrhoea and vomiting.

- Because of the urgency of the transfer request, Mrs A was discharged to a private community facility with a district nursing referral.
- After a district nursing visit two days later, Mrs A was readmitted with other medical issues to a rural community hospital, then to another facility for permanent placement.

Review findings

- Policies, procedures and guidelines for the management of a norovirus outbreak were available to all staff but not followed.
- There was a lack of awareness among staff at the rest home about the gravity of a norovirus outbreak and the need for containment to prevent putting vulnerable people in facilities and in the community at risk.
- Failure to communicate the risk of norovirus infection when transferring the patient between facilities meant preventative measures were not implemented by the receiving facilities.
- The memorandum about the norovirus outbreak may not have been communicated to all staff, which limited preventative actions being taken.
- Lack of coordination of care among multiple agencies for a patient with complex needs meant the patient was transferred between several agencies prior to being placed in

(Cont over.)

suitable permanent accommodation. These multiple transfers put others at risk of infection.

Actions subsequently taken

- Discharge planning in complex cases is to identify one agency as the lead coordinator to oversee continued coordinated care.
- The case of Mrs A is to be used as an example in infection control education and training programmes for rest homes and other community providers.

Health Quality & Safety Commission comment

Norovirus is a serious illness in elderly and vulnerable patients.

The Ministry of Health requires norovirus outbreaks to be notified to the local public health service.

It is vital that providers establish and follow infection control protocols.

The Commission encourages all aged care facilities to implement the Ministry of Health guidelines for managing norovirus outbreaks in hospitals and elderly care institutions.¹ These guidelines cover the requirements of a facility for:

- care of residents/patients and staff
- collection of samples
- hand hygiene
- notification of outbreak.

Specifically, all facilities should have:

- standardised communication processes for handover of patients requiring transfer between facilities so essential information is communicated and required preventative measures implemented
- clear and simple standardised protocols so all staff know how to manage and contain an outbreak within a facility
- a clear communications policy so all staff are notified when a norovirus outbreak occurs and reminded about management and containment protocols.

¹ Ministry of Health. 2009. *Guidelines for the Management of Norovirus Outbreaks in Hospitals and Elderly Care Institutions*. Wellington: Ministry of Health. URL: https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/guidelines-management-norovirus_0.pdf (accessed August 2015).