

Administrative Closure – February 10, 2011

Healthcare Inspection – Alleged Quality of Care Issues,
Robley Rex VA Medical Center, Louisville, Kentucky

MCI # 2011-235-CR-0009

2011-00235-HI-0211

0021 closed

John Dingell, U.S. Representative from Kentucky, requested that OIG review allegations made by (b)(6)

(b)(6) Specifically, (b)(6) alleged an Emergency Department (ED) physician prescribed a contraindicated medication that caused an adverse reaction, and the medical center's staff members were unprofessional and rude.

We received the complaint on November 9, 2010, and planned an on-site visit for the week of November 29. On November 19, we learned a medical team, which included VISN 9's Chief Medical Officer, and the medical center's Chief of Staff and Associate Chief of Staff/Ambulatory Care, had already conducted a comprehensive review of this complaint. Therefore, we suspended our on-site review and conducted an oversight review of the medical team's findings, which we received on January 17, 2011.

Case Summary

The patient is a 44-year-old veteran with medical diagnoses that include Grave's Disease (thyroid disorder), bipolar and personality disorders, and schizophrenia. In May 2009, an endocrinologist treated the patient's thyroid gland with radioactive iodine to decrease the amount of thyroid hormone the gland produced.

On September 1, the patient had minor throat irritation with sinus drainage and a medical center ED physician prescribed Actifed.¹ The patient's prescribed outpatient medications at that time were acetaminophen (pain), methimazole (for hyperthyroidism), metoprolol (blood pressure), and olanzapine (mood stabilizer).

On September 2, the patient saw a VA endocrinologist for a scheduled thyroid follow-up appointment. Blood tests revealed the patient's thyroid was producing too little thyroid hormone, which is an expected effect of radioactive iodine treatment. Consequently, the physician discontinued the methimazole and prescribed a low dose of levothyroxine (synthetic replacement thyroid hormone). The physician also lowered the dosage of blood pressure medication.

¹ Actifed is a combination antihistamine/decongestant. An antihistamine blocks the release of histamines that may cause swelling, sneezing, itchiness, and nasal congestion. A decongestant helps relieve nasal stuffiness.

On September 7, an ED physician examined the patient, who complained of "high blood pressure and high heart rate." The patient also said she believed she was having an allergic reaction to Actifed. The patient had no skin rash and was breathing without difficulty. Her documented blood pressure was 140/72 mm Hg and the heart rate was 72 beats per minute, which was consistent with the last 6 months of documented blood pressure and heart rate. The ED physician discontinued the Actifed, and prescribed Benadryl (an antihistamine).

On September 8, the patient interacted with medical center staff three times: once by telephone and twice in person. Interactions involved the patient's insistence that the ED physician should not have prescribed Actifed for her on September 1.

On September 10, the patient presented to the ED with complaints of feeling achy and a belief she was having a reaction to Actifed. The ED physician diagnosed general anxiety disorder because she did not exhibit clinical symptoms of an adverse medication reaction. Documentation indicates the patient became loud and disorderly and refused to leave the ED after she was discharged. VA security escorted the patient from the ED.

Medical record entries document the patient's escalating anxiety over the following 24 hours. Additionally, notes indicate the patient's family and advocate both voiced concerns related to the patient's mental health during this time. Consequently, the patient was involuntarily admitted to the medical center's psychiatric unit for 72 hours for safety and stabilization. She remained on the unit for 10 days.

Review Summary and Conclusions

We interviewed the patient on November 10, 2010. We also reviewed the patient's medical record, the medical team's review, and VA's response to Representative Dingell.

The medical team determined the patient was not prescribed contraindicated medications, and we concur. Actifed is not contraindicated for patients who are also prescribed methimazole, levothyroxine, and/or metoprolol. Although adverse reactions and side effects occur with Actifed, they are not common. While the medical record documented the patient believed she was experiencing an adverse reaction to Actifed, clinical assessments (normal blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory status, and absence of skin rash) did not confirm she was exhibiting physical symptoms of an adverse medication reaction. However, the patient had a complex psychiatric history, and the change of medications may have contributed to the distress she was experiencing.

We could not confirm or refute the patient's perceptions of unprofessional or rude staff. The medical team reported that the medical center's ED staff review customer feedback and discuss methods to improve customer service during monthly staff meetings. We agree this is an effective method to problem solve customer service issues.

We made no recommendations and consider the case closed.

Prepared by: _____ //es// _____

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