

SPSO decision report

Case: 201300511, A Medical Practice in the Forth Valley NHS Board area
Sector: health
Subject: clinical treatment / diagnosis
Outcome: not upheld, no recommendations

Summary

Mrs C's mother (Mrs A) died from complications following surgery for an abdominal aortic aneurysm (bulging of part of the aorta, the body's largest artery). Mrs C complained that there was a delay in diagnosing the aneurysm (a weak point in the blood vessels, which causes them to bulge or balloon out). She said that her mother had been visiting the practice for two years and had been diagnosed with sciatica (back and leg pain, caused by irritation of or pressure on the sciatic nerve). However, she felt that her mother should have been referred to hospital earlier for further tests. She also complained about the follow-up care after her mother had surgery, in particular a delay in identifying post-operative complications.

To investigate the complaint, we considered all the relevant documentation, including the complaints correspondence and Mrs A's medical records. We also obtained independent advice from one of our medical advisers.

Our investigation found that the practice had acted reasonably, and that there was no evidence of an unreasonable delay in referring Mrs A to hospital for tests. Our adviser said that there was no evidence of specific symptoms that would have alerted the practice to an aortic aneurysm, and that it was in fact picked up by chance during an x-ray to investigate back pain. She also said that as there are usually no symptoms, such aneurysms are often not discovered until they leak or burst. Once the aneurysm was identified, appropriate action was taken to investigate it further and to resolve it. We also found no evidence that the practice had failed to assess Mrs A after her operation or that there was a delay in diagnosing the post-operative complications. The operation was clearly a risky one, as Mrs A had other health conditions. The medical records show that the procedure was complicated, and we noted that doctors had discussed the risks with Mr and Mrs A (Mrs C's parents) before the operation was carried out.