

Investigation finds ‘significant’ failures over care of Downs Syndrome patient in Belfast City Hospital.

Findings highlight the need to continue to raise awareness and improve practice for some of the most vulnerable patients within the hospital system - Ombudsman

The sister of a man with Downs Syndrome has received an apology from the Belfast Trust following an Ombudsman investigation into his treatment in Belfast City Hospital.

The woman made the complaint to the Ombudsman after her concerns could not be resolved by the Trust. She said that he was treated unfairly during his stay in the hospital because it did not properly take his learning disabilities into account.

She said that he was offered food when he was ‘nil by mouth’, while at other times he was given inappropriate food such as porridge to eat. She complained that he was not given proper pain relief, and that a suctioning procedure took place on the night he died which led him to suffer unnecessarily. She said that there was also a conflict and a lack of coordination between the two medical teams who were looking after him, resulting in poor overall care.

Our investigation found that contrary to the advice of a Speech and Language Therapist, the patient was fed porridge and other foods inappropriate to his condition.

We also found that the Trust failed to use any kind of pain tool to assess and record the patient’s pain or distress. This was a particular failing as he was unable to verbalise how much pain he was in. Our investigation found that despite the availability of tools and other resources designed to support care for people with dementia and learning disabilities, the hospital did not make the reasonable adjustments to meet his needs.

It also failed to make sure that his family were kept informed about his treatment. There was a lack of co-ordinated communication not only between the Palliative Care and Care of the Elderly teams, but also between these teams and the family. This was especially so over the Trust’s dealings with the family’s complaint.

We found that the Trust’s responses during the complaint process lacked empathy and that a better response may have helped resolve the family’s concerns earlier so that they didn’t feel they had to bring their complaint to the Ombudsman.

Commenting on the investigation, Ombudsman Margaret Kelly said:

‘The Trust’s failures in this case were significant. Our investigation highlights the need to continue to raise awareness and improve practice for some of the most vulnerable patients within the hospital system. The failings in relation to care of the patient were compounded by the added distress for the family arising from poor complaints handling.’

That is why I have asked the Trust to apologise to the complainant, as well as recommending a number improvements in relation to end of life care, better coordination between medical teams, and staff training.'

Ms Kelly also welcomed the improvements already identified by the Trust as a result of this case, which includes a new Learning Disability resource on the Trust's internal website and a commitment to provide written instructions following each Speech and Language Therapy recommendation.