

Advice to discontinue medication
18HDC00423, 20 June 2019

*Alternative health practitioner ~ Anxiety ~ Medication ~
Withdrawal ~ Side effects ~ Rights 4(4), 10(6)*

A man who suffered from an anxiety disorder took venlafaxine, a serotonin and noradrenaline reuptake inhibitor, to help him to manage the disorder. At the time of events, the man had been taking venlafaxine for 11 years.

The man attended an initial appointment with a practitioner who provides alternative health services. Subsequently, the man attended 43 further appointments with the practitioner. The practitioner did not record clinical notes about the services he provided to the man at these appointments.

At one of the appointments, the practitioner advised the man to consider ceasing venlafaxine “cold turkey”. The man began tapering off venlafaxine, and ceased taking it entirely within five weeks. The man said that consequently his nervous system became destabilised, and both his mental and physical capabilities were impaired significantly.

The manufacturer of the brand of venlafaxine that the man had been taking publishes a consumer medicine information sheet. The sheet warns consumers not to taper off venlafaxine too quickly, especially if they have been taking it for a long time, lest they develop a variety of adverse discontinuation symptoms. It also advises consumers to obtain the help of a doctor if they decide to taper off venlafaxine.

Findings

It was found that the advice given to the man to consider ceasing venlafaxine “cold turkey” put him at risk of developing discontinuation syndrome and a number of side effects. Therefore, the provision of the advice breached Right 4(4).

Adverse comment was made about the clinic for omitting to have a complaints procedure that complies with Right 10(6), and for failing to record any clinical notes of the man’s 44 appointments.

Recommendations

It was recommended that the practitioner reflect on his failure to minimise the potential harm to the man, and provide a written apology to the man.

It was recommended that the clinic implement (a) a written policy that staff are not to advise consumers about matters relating to medications; (b) a written documentation policy; and (c) a complaints procedure that reflects consumers’ rights and providers’ obligations under the Code.