

**Communication of test results to patient
15HDC01387, 16 June 2017**

General practitioner ~ Chronic lymphatic leukaemia ~ Follow-up ~ Rights 6(1), 4(1), 4(5)

A 78-year-old man presented to his general practitioner (GP) at a medical centre, with a sore knee, a recent slowing of speech, and a “fizzing” feeling in his feet. The GP requested blood tests. The results showed that the man had a “[m]oderate number of reactive lymphocytes”, and the results were referred to a haematologist.

The man presented to his GP to discuss his blood test results. The GP told HDC that he informed the man of the initial results of the blood tests, and that they were awaiting further results. The GP sent a referral to the outpatients clinic at a public hospital, owing to the man’s slowing of speech and his feeling of “fizzing” in his feet.. The GP did not mention the man’s high lymphocyte levels in the referral letter, or that he was awaiting a supplementary report but did attach the blood test results that showed the high level of lymphocytes and that a further report was to follow from a pathologist.

The man subsequently had blood taken for the further tests as requested by the GP. Later that day, a haematologist reported that the further test results were consistent with chronic lymphocytic leukaemia (CLL). The GP documented the man’s diagnosis as “Chronic lymphatic leukaemia”. He did not forward that information to the outpatients clinic at the hospital, or inform the man of the diagnosis. The GP told HDC that he deferred informing the man of the diagnosis until the man had been reviewed in the outpatients clinic at the public hospital.

The GP received notification that his referral regarding the man’s slowing of speech and his feeling of “fizzing” in his feet had been received by the outpatients clinic at the hospital. The GP told HDC that he had the expectation that the results of the investigations would be reviewed by the medical team at the hospital, and he felt that he had appropriately deputised the outpatients clinic to follow up on the man’s CLL.

The GP, as the clinician who ordered the blood tests, had a responsibility to communicate to the man the diagnosis of CLL and its implications. Provision of this information would have enabled the man to be a partner in his own treatment. By failing to inform the man of his diagnosis of CLL and its implications, the GP failed to provide the man with information that a reasonable consumer in the man’s circumstances would expect to receive. Accordingly, the GP breached Right 6(1).

The GP also had a responsibility to arrange further assessment of the man’s condition, put in place an ongoing management plan, and take responsibility for ensuring that he carried out appropriate monitoring of the man’s condition. By failing to take these actions, the GP failed to provide services to the man with reasonable care and skill, and breached Right 4(1).

The GP had a responsibility to communicate to the outpatients clinic the results of the additional tests he had ordered since the original referral that confirmed a diagnosis of CLL. The man’s diagnosis of CLL was material information that the GP had a responsibility to communicate to the DHB. By failing to inform the outpatients clinic of the man’s diagnosis of CLL, the GP failed to facilitate co-operation between providers to ensure the quality and continuity of services provided to the man. Accordingly, the GP breached Right 4(5).

Adverse comment was made in relation to the medical centre’s failure to have a written policy in place regarding the communication of test results to consumers.

The Commissioner recommended that the GP undertake an audit of his clinical records to ensure that all patient test results he has received in the last six months have been communicated to patients and followed up appropriately and provide a written apology to the man. The medical centre was asked to review its current policy regarding high priority test results and to audit compliance with its policy regarding the communication of test results to patients.