

**Failure to test for pregnancy prior to prescribing isotretinoin
16HDC01119, 18 August 2017**

*Dermatologist ~ Dermatology clinic ~ Acne ~
Pregnancy test ~ Vicarious liability ~ Standard of care ~ Right 4(1)*

A young woman had a history of severe acne. At the age of 16, she received her first course of isotretinoin treatment, which is primarily used to treat severe nodular acne. Isotretinoin is teratogenic and can cause birth defects in an unborn child. For this reason, pregnancy is an absolute contraindication for the use of isotretinoin. At the age of 22, the woman consulted a dermatologist about commencing isotretinoin again, but did not proceed with treatment at this time.

At the age of 26, the woman presented to the dermatologist again regarding isotretinoin treatment. At the consultation, the dermatologist was aware that the woman was of childbearing potential. The dermatologist documented that the woman had a partner, was sexually active (albeit infrequently), and used condoms. The dermatologist told HDC that during the consultation, the woman did not say anything that “indicated a risk she might be pregnant”.

The dermatologist prescribed the woman isotretinoin but excluded a pregnancy test when she ordered pre-treatment monitoring blood tests, and did not order any other form of pregnancy test.

Findings

It was held that by prescribing the woman isotretinoin without carrying out a pre-treatment pregnancy test, the dermatologist failed to provide services to the woman with reasonable care and skill, and therefore breached Right 4(1).

In providing dermatology services to the woman, the dermatologist was acting within the scope of her authority as an agent/member of the dermatology clinic. Accordingly, the clinic was vicariously liable for the dermatologist’s breach of Right 4(1).

Recommendations

In response to the provisional opinion, the dermatologist provided a written apology to HDC, for forwarding to the woman. The dermatologist also arranged to enrol in the Royal Australasian College of Physicians’ Communication Skills online course, and will provide HDC with a certificate of completion. As such, the Commissioner made no further recommendations in relation to the dermatologist.