

Teenage Patient Dies After Doctors' Injection Mistake

Two doctors could face manslaughter charges over the death of a teenager who was mistakenly injected with an anti-cancer drug into his spine.

Wayne Jowett, 18, had been suffering from leukaemia and was virtually at the end of his treatment and in remission when the accident happened at the Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham, on 4 January.

Despite emergency measures to wash the drug out of his spinal canal, Mr Jowett was left paralysed, lapsed into a coma and died yesterday, four weeks after the accident. Professor Gordon McVie, director of the Cancer Research Campaign, described it as an "unspeakable error" that should never have happened.

Mr Jowett's father, also called Wayne, and his mother, Stella, who were with him when he died, issued a one-sentence statement through solicitors confirming the death and adding: "We now wish to be left to grieve in peace."

The accident is the fourteenth such error since 1985. In ten of the cases patients have died. The Jowetts' solicitor, Paul Balen, said: "My clients have been appalled to learn that so many other families have suffered as a result of similar mistakes ... they hope that no more patients will die before hospitals, doctors and the pharmaceutical industry change their procedures to ensure that such mistakes cannot happen again."

The doctors responsible for the error, who have not been named, are suspended by the hospital pending the outcome of an inquiry. In the past the error has happened when doctors confused the toxic drug vincristine, which is injected into a vein, with another drug, methotrexate, which is injected into the spine. The two drugs are clearly labeled and packaged, and there are strict protocols governing how they should be administered. But the errors keep happening.

John MacDonald, chief executive of the Queen's Medical Centre, said yesterday that the hospital accepted responsibility for the tragedy. "We have failed Wayne and his family and for that we are deeply sorry. We apologize unreservedly ... and would like to express our deepest sympathy."

He added: "A serious mistake was made when Wayne's drug treatment was administered wrongly. A drug that should have been used intravenously was given intrathecally "into the spinal cord. In spite of immediate action being taken it proved impossible to save Wayne."

In a similar case in 1997, two doctors who mistakenly injected vincristine into the spine of Richie William, an 18-year-old being treated for the cancer non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, were charged with manslaughter. The doctors, from Great Ormond Street hospital, London, were cleared after the Old Bailey was told of the "chapter of accidents and misunderstandings" that led to his death, but neither has worked in a clinical post since. The patient's mother received £65,000 in an out-of-court settlement in 1999.

The latest death came one day after an inquest into a 23-year-old Northamptonshire woman who died after a doctor in Leicester made a similar mistake.
