

Publication of Retrospective Review of Cancer Care

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A retrospective review of 822 cancer patients treated at Colchester Hospital University NHS Foundation Trust between 2010 and 2014 has concluded that there is no evidence of systematic data manipulation at the Trust.

The review follows a report from the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in November 2013 which raised "serious concerns" about staff being "pressured to change data . . . to make it seem people were being treated in line with national guidelines".

Following publication of the CQC report, the Trust commissioned a retrospective review of the experience of a number of its cancer patients who may have been affected by misreporting.

Over the period covered by the review, the Trust treated approximately 33,000 cancer patients. The review examined approximately 3,000 data points for 822 of the patients most likely to be affected by the allegations. It found 16 cases of possible deliberate and inappropriate data entry but in none of these cases could the reviewers establish intent to deliberately falsify the figures.

The review found a number of small discrepancies between recorded and actual patient data and concluded that these were most likely the result of minor, but erroneous, interpretations of the Cancer Waiting Times (CWT) guidelines. These discrepancies sometimes made waiting times appear longer than in reality and sometimes shorter.

The East of England Strategic Clinical Network conducted an external review of a 10% sample of the work conducted by the retrospective review team and concluded "the overarching impression was there was evidence of inaccuracies in the cancer waits data but this was as likely to negatively impact on the trust's performance statistics as enhance them. This suggested the issue was one of effectiveness and competence in the cancer management team rather than a deliberate manipulation."

Dr Lucy Moore, Chief Executive of Colchester Hospital University NHS Foundation Trust, said: "I welcome the publication of this report and I am very pleased there appears to be no evidence of systematic data manipulation at the Trust. It is important that we now rebuild confidence in the cancer services provided here in Colchester. We have service improvements to make and make them we will."

Dr Christine Macleod, NHS England Essex Area Team Medical Director, said: "I chaired the assurance panel, with reference to senior cancer specialists from other hospital trusts and a recognised statistician.

The panel examined and verified the methodology, information collection and analysis undertaken by the hospital ensuring the independence of the Retrospective Review, and its findings and conclusions.

While the review found no evidence of systematic data manipulation, it did find evidence of poor documentation and record-keeping and it identified a number of patients who had experienced sub-optimal care, diagnosis or treatment.

While it is impossible to say whether any of these patients have suffered long-term harm as a result of sub-optimal care since the success of cancer treatment is generally measured against five-year survival rates, the rate of potential harm identified compares similarly with studies in other acute trusts. The exception, however, is one patient where it is clear that harm was suffered. All appropriate action has now been taken.

Dr Moore said: "We apologise unreservedly to any of our patients who have suffered delays in treatment or diagnosis or who have received poor care. We have scrutinised the care of any patient where we think there might have been imperfect care and the Trust is in contact with all of the patients who have suffered significant sub-optimal care. We are continuing to work with our health partners to improve the quality of our cancer services."

The Trust has made a number of improvements to its cancer services over the last year. Working closely with specialist colleagues at the Royal Marsden, it has developed and delivered a comprehensive improvement plan. All the recommendations from the retrospective review have either been implemented or are in the process of being implemented.

Improvements to date include the recruitment of additional staff, the development of a programme of regular, continuous training and the re-establishment of the Trust's Cancer Board.

Dr Shane Gordon, Chief Clinical Officer at the North East Essex Clinical Commissioning Group, said: "The review has been very thorough and the Trust has learnt a lot of important lessons which should improve the safety of cancer care it provides. This is a firm foundation but clearly sustained focus is required to ensure improvement is maintained. We are working closely with our colleagues in the Trust to ensure this focus continues."

The Trust has also made significant strides in improving its data collection and handling for cancer patients and it has now replaced the previous regime of multiple databases for cancer patients with the highly regarded Somerset Cancer Waiting Times management system.