

LEGAL EAGLE EYE NEWSLETTER

November 2000

For the Nursing Profession

Volume 8 Number 11

Anti-Psychotic Meds: Hospital Held Liable For Patient's Death From Hyperthermia.

The thirty year-old patient was being treated in a psych hospital for chronic schizophrenia. He was taking Thorazine, Prolixin and Cogentin.

He asked the charge nurse's permission to play basketball outside with a psych aide and other patients. It was 5:30 p.m. on June 22. The temperature was 84° F with 54% relative humidity.

The charge nurse reviewed his chart and saw the medications he was taking. Knowing photosensitivity is a side-effect she made him put sunblock lotion on his skin.

He played vigorously for an hour, stopping once to go inside the air conditioning to rest and drink water. He went back outside, but sat beside the court instead of playing in the game.

Then he became confused and disoriented. The psych aide knew about photosensitivity and told him to put his shirt back on. Then he tried to stand but collapsed. Paramedics transported him to another hospital's E.R. where he was pronounced dead.

The family sued the Department of Mental Health. The Court of Claims of Ohio ruled for the family. The court ruled the attending psychiatrist was negligent for failing to note exercise restrictions in the patient's chart for the benefit of the nursing staff.



Neuroleptic medications can affect the body's ability to regulate temperature.

Physicians and nurses caring for psychiatric patients should know that patients on these meds should not exercise in hot weather.

Hyperthermia or heat stroke is a rare but clinically recognized side effect of anti-psychotic medications, and it can cause a patient's death.

COURT OF CLAIMS OF OHIO, 1999.

The court also found fault with the charge nurse. Though her conduct technically was not the legal cause of death, she contributed to the patient's death by failing to appreciate the dangers which neuroleptic medications can pose to patients, specifically the danger of heat stroke from physical overexertion under hot weather conditions.

According to the court, psychiatrists and psychiatric nurses should know through their training and from the medical literature, i.e., the Physician's Desk Reference, that the meds prescribed for this patient, which are very widely used in the psychiatric treatment of schizophrenia, pose a rare but potentially fatal side effect.

In even modestly warm temperatures, the body of a patient on these medications lacks the ability to dissipate heat through perspiration, leading to possible hyperthermia or heat stroke.

The court accepted testimony that it is a deviation from the legal standard of care for psychiatric nurses to allow a patient on these meds to exercise in hot weather. But strictly speaking it is the physician's legal responsibility to bring it to the nurses' attention by ordering an exercise restriction. Trisdale v. Ohio Department of Mental Health, 724 N.E. 2d 868 (Ohio Ct. Cl., 1999).

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