



Pathology & Biology Section – 2005

G23 Near Miss Incidents: Feasibility Studies Assessing Forensic Physicians' Perceptions of Near Misses in Police Custody Suites in London, United Kingdom

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After attending this presentation, attendees will gain an understanding of the causes of near miss incidents and how they may be applied to the care of prisoners in custodial settings.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by raising awareness of the need for further research into the care of prisoners in custody, in order to try and prevent harm or death occurring.

Background: Deaths of prisoners in police custody are tragedies for all those involved. Potentially preventable deaths in police custody include those which involve illicit drugs, alcohol and deliberate self-harm. Near miss incidents (NMI) that did not result in death have a crucial role in understanding risk factors in custody. A program of research has been developed to study near miss incidents. For the purposes of this research NMI, have been defined as 'an unplanned and unforeseeable or unforeseen event that could have resulted, but did not result, in human death or may have resulted in injury or other adverse outcomes.'

Aims & Methods: An initial study was undertaken with pilot interviews of 3 forensic physicians (FP) practising in London, U.K., to create a structured questionnaire for all forensic physicians working in London. The questionnaire was the basis of a retrospective recall survey of all FPs working in London as Forensic Medical Examiners (FME) designed to assess numbers of NMIs, patterns in occurrence and relevant learning points within the previous 6 months. A cover letter, background questionnaire (exploring the background of the medical practitioner), copies of NMI survey, and reply paid envelopes were sent to each FME (n = 134) in London, working for the Metropolitan Police Service. Data about all incidents were anonymised.

Results: There was an overall response rate of 73% (n=96). Of FME respondents, 18% were Principal grade, Senior (24%), Standard (35%) and Assistant (23%). 20% of FMEs had specific mental health training and qualification. 52% had forensic qualifications such as the Diploma of Medical Jurisprudence, and the Diploma of Forensic Medical Sciences. FMEs had been qualified in medicine for a mean of 27 years and had been FMEs for a mean of 11 years. Thirty-eight NMIs were reported by 27 FMEs (of all levels) although the retrospective method meant that some data are incomplete. The reason for police contact was recorded as alcohol (n=8), theft and robbery (n=7), warrants (n=4), violence (n=3), traffic violations (n=2) and single cases of drugs, murder and immigration offences. Twenty-seven NMIs involved white Caucasians, 4 involved Asians, and 2 involved blacks (origin not known). Form 57M (a screening questionnaire used in police custody to identify medical and mental health problems) was positive in 12 cases, and the Police National Computer had warnings in 6 cases. Of the main perceived cause of each NMI, illicit drugs were involved in 12/38; alcohol in 17/38; deliberate self-harm in 11/38; problems with searches, checks or rousing in 8/38; failure of inter-agency communications in 5/38; and insufficient resources in 4/38. In a number of cases more than one factor was involved. Examples of type of NMIs were: illicit drugs – overdose, drug swallowing, drug concealment, theft of drugs from FME; alcohol – self-harm, physical injuries (ruptured spleen, head injury), hypoglycemia; self-harm – concealed knife, self-hanging on paper suit, drug swallowing).

Summary and Conclusions: Using the figures generated by this study, the reported rate of NMIs is 0.4 NMI per FME which gives a total annual rate of 107 NMIs in this setting. These data reflect the incidence of NMI in one of 43 police forces in England and Wales. These data are broadly consistent with documented patterns of deaths in police custody that would appear to reinforce the validity of the data. The need for a prospective study is supported. The next stage is a prospective 6 month study in which NMIs will be recorded around the time of occurrence, with analysis of each incident subsequently conducted by a research team, in order to learn lessons which may be utilised to attempt to prevent potentially avoidable deaths in police custody.

Deaths in Custody, Forensic Physicians, Near Miss Incidents