

Patient briefing



Information
15 September 2004

**This is a summary
of the information
issued to the NHS**

Ensuring the appropriate provision of manual bowel evacuation for patients with an established spinal cord lesion

What is manual bowel evacuation?

Patients who experience loss of normal bowel function and control because of nerve damage to their spinal cord can need help in emptying their bowels. Manual bowel evacuation, or the digital removal of faeces, is rarely undertaken as a method of bowel care in NHS acute trusts.

People with established spinal cord lesions experience loss of normal bowel function and control as a direct and permanent consequence of nerve damage. Many are dependent on manual evacuation as their essential and routine method of bowel care.

What is the patient safety risk to patients with spinal injuries?

For people with established spinal cord lesions, manual bowel evacuation is often a part of their bowel care routine. This essential routine can be interrupted if, for example, they need to be admitted to a general NHS hospital that does not specialise in treating spinal injuries.

Nursing staff in this type of general NHS setting are not often asked to perform manual bowel evacuation and this can lead to confusion about how it is undertaken. Owing to this confusion, and despite clear existing guidance, some spinal injured patients have had manual bowel evacuation denied to them.

Failure to provide manual bowel evacuation can have grave consequences. It is one of the most common cases of a condition known as autonomic dysreflexia (severe hypertension or very high blood pressure), which can lead to fatal cerebral haemorrhage (bleeding in the brain) or cardiac arrest (heart attack).



What is the National Patient Safety Agency doing to resolve the problem?

To ensure that patients and staff know exactly what is expected in relation to manual bowel evacuation the NPSA is:

- issuing a patient safety information notice (15 September 2004) to every NHS director of nursing in England and Wales clarifying the issues.

The notice, which will be shared with front line nursing staff, provides clear recommendations to ensure that spinal injuries patients receive the care they need and are entitled to;

- working with the Spinal Injuries Association (SIA) to develop a wallet sized information card for spinal injuries patients.

The card will explain to healthcare staff that the patient requires manual bowel evacuation and directs them to further information sources, like their hospital's policy and the SIA and NPSA websites.

The full patient safety information notice is available from the NPSA website at www.npsa.nhs.uk/advice

For further details about this patient briefing and the NPSA's work, please contact:

Joanna Parker, Head of Safer Practice
National Patient Safety Agency
4-8 Maple Street
London
W1T 5HD

Telephone: 020 7927 9500

Spinal Injuries Association website:

www.spinal.co.uk

Freephone information line: 0800 980 0501