

Complaint against Hospital Authority about dispensing arrangements at St. John Hospital

Investigation Report

The Complaint

This Office received a complaint against St. John Hospital (“SJH”) under the Hospital Authority (“HA”).

2. Allegedly, the complainant went to the Accident and Emergency Department (“A&E”) of SJH on 10 March 2019, and the doctor prescribed her medication, which included a course of antibiotics for seven days. While she was awaiting her medication, a nurse told her that A&E could only give her two doses of antibiotics on that day and she could collect the rest the following day. The complainant explained that she could not return to SJH the following day as she would be out of Hong Kong for a business trip. The nurse’s supervisor explained that they could not give her more than that as SJH was not a large hospital, but she could collect the rest the following day or go to any other urban hospitals to get it. On the complainant’s repeated requests, SJH eventually gave her two days’ antibiotics. Since there was no registered pharmacy in Cheung Chau, the complainant eventually asked a friend to help her buy the prescribed antibiotics from a registered pharmacy in the urban area.

3. The complainant queried why SJH could operate without sufficient reserve of antibiotics during an influenza surge, and considered it inconsiderate of the hospital to make a patient return to collect medication the following day or go to an urban hospital to get it.

4. After assessment, we decided to launch a full investigation into this case.

Our Findings

Operation Hours and Medication Reserve of SJH’s Pharmacy

5. SJH provides essential, emergency and community medical services to Cheung Chau residents, and its A&E offers 24-hour services. The operation hours of SJH’s pharmacy are 9am to 1pm and then 2pm to 5pm from Monday to Friday, and 9am to 12:30pm on Saturday. The pharmacy is closed on Saturday afternoons, Sundays and

public holidays.

6. The amount of medication reserve at SJH is arranged according to the ordinary daily usage and will be increased to meet seasonal needs such as influenza surges. Every week, the pharmacy will refill medication reserve at A&E according to the needs of the Department.

Relevant Guidelines of SJH

7. The internal guidelines of SJH's Nursing Department stipulates that duty nurses at A&E will dispense medication to patients beyond the pharmacy's operation hours, the amount of which will be sufficient until the pharmacy resumes services. For example, a patient will get one day's medication if he/she visits the hospital on a Sunday or the evening of a weekday. If it is a Saturday afternoon or the day before a public holiday, he/she will be given medication for two days. Where the prescribed amount of medication exceeds the amount the nurse dispenses, the patient can collect the rest of the medicine from other pharmacies under HA by presenting the prescription or from SJH's pharmacy when it resumes services.

Major Sequence of Events

8. The complainant went to SJH's A&E on the Sunday afternoon of 10 March 2019, and was prescribed medication including antibiotics for seven days. The A&E nurse followed the internal guidelines (see **para. 7**) and dispensed to her medicine for one day. The complainant requested that the full course of medication be dispensed to her as she would be out of town the following day and therefore would not be able to collect the rest of the medicine. Two nurses explained to her that as the operation hours of the hospital's pharmacy had ended, they could only give her medicine for one day and she would have to return the following day, or go to the pharmacy of other urban hospitals to collect the rest of the medicine.

9. When the complainant refused such arrangement, the nurse in-charge explained to her that SJH is only a district hospital without 24-hour pharmacy services, and the hospital's A&E only keeps certain amount of medicine for emergency use as well as for patients to be discharged. Having considered the complainant's situation, the nurse in-charge exercised discretion and dispensed to her medication for two days, and suggested that she go to the A&E Department of other hospitals with 24-hour pharmacy services (such as Pamela Youde Nethersole Eastern Hospital and Queen Mary Hospital on Hong

Kong Island) in person or ask her family or friends to collect the rest of the medicine.

HA's Comments

10. Generally speaking, the pharmacy staff of public hospitals will check prescriptions when dispensing medication to patients in order to verify the types and dosages of medicine. Where necessary, the staff will also advise patients on the use of medication (such as the correct use of medicine).

11. With resources constraint, SJH, a small district hospital, could not offer 24-hour pharmacy services. HA has adopted appropriate measures to ensure smooth operation of SJH while taking care of patients' needs. First of all, duty nurses at SJH's A&E can dispense certain amount of medication for patients and then the patients or their family can collect the rest of the medicine from other HA pharmacies. When the patients collect the rest of the medicine, the pharmacy staff will check the prescriptions and the medicine prescribed, and offer professional advice on the use of medication where necessary.

12. The allegations that SJH failed to dispense prescribed amount of medication to patients or its A&E failed to provide the required amount of medication in the guidelines because of insufficient medication reserve are not true. On 10 March 2019, the medication reserve at SJH was sufficient, and the complainant could not get the prescribed amount of medication because it was a Sunday and the nurse should dispense one day's medicine to her according to the guidelines (see **para. 7**). Nevertheless, having considered that the complainant could not collect the rest of the medicine the following day, the nurse exercised discretion and gave her two days' dosages.

13. After reviewing the case, HA held that the nurse at SJH's A&E had followed the guidelines in dispensing medication to the complainant and, upon learning the complainant's situation, recommended solutions and exercised discretion in handling her case. The medication dispensing at SJH has been effective, and HA considered this an individual case. HA understood that the complainant was not feeling well on that day and it might not be desirable for her to make a trip to the pharmacy of other urban hospitals. Owing to this case, SJH is now exploring various proposals to allow patients in Cheung Chau to collect medicine in a fast and convenient manner, as well as to better utilise the limited public healthcare resources.

Our Comments

14. HA already clarified that SJH's medication reserve is not insufficient (see **para. 12**). Moreover, in handling the complainant's case, the A&E nurses had followed the guidelines and exercised their discretion to give her medicine for more than one day (see **paras. 7 to 9**).

15. Nevertheless, we find SJH's current arrangement for medication dispensing beyond the operation hours (see **para. 7**) undesirable for patients and hardly understandable. First of all, if prescriptions and the types and dosages of medicine prescribed should be checked and verified before dispensing medication to patients, and such procedures must be handled by pharmacy staff (see **para. 10**), the current practice of having the nurses dispense medication would be inappropriate. If such procedures for medication dispensing can be handled by nurses, we see no reason why SJH allows them to dispense to patients only enough amount but not the full course of medication before the pharmacy resumes services. Furthermore, this case shows that SJH allows nurses discretion to dispense medication of a larger amount than as required in the guidelines under exceptional circumstances. If nurses can have discretion on this, what is the difference between allowing them to dispense medication for one more day and to dispense the full course of medication?

16. According to our understanding, there are currently three HA hospitals, namely SJH, North Lantau Hospital and Tin Shui Wai Hospital, that do not provide 24-hour pharmacy services. The pharmacies of these hospitals have similar arrangements for medication dispensing beyond their operation hours. Nevertheless, HA has planned to introduce 24-hour pharmacy services in North Lantau Hospital and Tin Shui Wai Hospital.

17. We understand that SJH is a small district hospital with limited resources. Hence, it is necessary for the hospital to give careful consideration in order to strike a balance between the hospital's operation and patients' needs (see **para. 11**). Patients visit the hospital because they feel sick. Understandably, the patients may find it very inconsiderate of the hospital to ask them to go again the following day or go to an urban hospital just to collect medicine.

18. In view of the above analysis, this Office considers this complaint against HA **substantiated**.

Recommendations

19. This Office recommends that HA review the current arrangement for medication dispensing beyond the operation hours of SJH's pharmacy and proactively explore the feasibility of providing 24-hour services, so that patients can collect the full course of medication prescribed after seeking consultation.

HA's Response to Our Recommendations

20. In response to our recommendation, HA has conducted a review and is of the view that providing 24-hour pharmacy services at SJH will add to the burden of this small district hospital's manpower. Having considered the cost-effectiveness of public resources utilisation, HA has no plan at this stage for providing 24-hour pharmacy services at SJH. For service enhancement, SJH and Hong Kong East Cluster are making positive plans to extend the dispensing services to provide more convenience to patients beyond the operation hours of the hospital's pharmacy.

21. The enhancement plans are to make use of information technology ("IT") and electronic medicine cabinets. When the doctors at SJH's A&E prescribe medication for patients beyond the pharmacy's operation hours, the prescriptions will be sent to the 24-hour pharmacy of other hospitals under Hong Kong East Cluster via the IT system for checking and verification by pharmacists in-residence. Upon verification of the prescriptions, duty nurses at SJH's A&E can dispense the full course of medication, using the medicine from the electronic medicine cabinets. The packages of medicine will show clearly the correct use. Patients may approach the staff at A&E for necessary assistance in case they have any enquiries. According to the current planning, SJH will start this pilot scheme in late 2020.

Concluding Remarks

22. We are pleased to note that SJH will start the aforesaid pilot scheme for enhancement of services beyond the operation hours of its pharmacy to dispense the full course of medication prescribed. Before the scheme commences, we urge SJH to exercise its discretion in handling medication dispensing for patients or their family who cannot collect the rest of medicine when the pharmacy resumes services or go to other hospitals.

Office of The Ombudsman
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