

Rapid Response Report

NPSA/2009/RRR02

From reporting to learning

30 April 2009

Female urinary catheters causing trauma to adult males

Adult urinary catheters are manufactured in two lengths: female length (20-26cm), and standard length (40-45cm). The use of standard length catheters in females poses no safety issues, as the shorter female length is designed for dignity issues when wearing skirts rather than trousers. However, if a female length catheter is accidentally used for a male, the 'balloon' inflated with sterile water to retain the catheter will be within the urethra, rather than the bladder, and can then cause severe trauma.

A search of incidents reported to the NPSA between 1/1/06 and 17/12/08 located 114 incidents where female catheters were inserted into male patients. All appeared to cause significant pain, plus some degree of haematuria, penile swelling, or retention. Seven caused significant haemorrhages, two were believed to have led to acute renal failure, and two to impaired renal function. These reports came from hospital and primary care settings, and catheter insertion was by nursing and medical staff. Additionally the MHRA was notified of a fatality partly related to haemorrhage after the use of a female catheter in a male patient.

For IMMEDIATE ACTION by all acute, mental health and primary care organisations in the NHS and independent sector. The deadline for ACTION COMPLETE is no later than 1 September 2009.

Chief Executives should nominate an appropriate person to ensure that:

1. This Rapid Response Report is immediately distributed to all staff who insert urinary catheters in teenage or adult male patients, and to community pharmacists who dispense urinary catheters.
2. Current supply systems for female length catheters are reviewed, with the aim of limiting access where appropriate (*for example, an acute hospital supplying female length catheters only via a specialist ward or specialist nurses rather than routinely stocking them on every ward*).
3. Where female length catheters are stocked in any setting where teenage or adult males are also treated, a warning notice is displayed close to the stock of female length catheters (*warning posters can be downloaded from <http://www.npsa.nhs.uk/nrls/alerts-and-directives/rapidrr/>*).
4. Where female length catheters are stocked in any setting where teenage or adult males are also treated, wherever possible additional clear warning labels are attached to each catheter before these are distributed to individual clinical areas or community staff bases (*see <http://www.npsa.nhs.uk/nrls/alerts-and-directives/rapidrr/> for important steps to ensure labelling is carried out safely, and labels for downloading*).
5. The content of local competency based training for urinary catheter insertion is reviewed to ensure it includes selection of catheters of the correct length.

The NPSA is developing a *Design for Patient Safety Guide* for labelling and packaging of single use medical devices planned for publication in 2010, and will continue to work with the MHRA and the medical devices industry to improve labelling of single use medical devices. We recommend healthcare organisations develop local purchasing for safety initiatives where preference is given to urinary catheters which are clearly labelled to avoid mis-selection errors.

The NPSA has informed:

NHS organisations, the independent sector, commissioners, regulators and relevant professional bodies, including those with responsibilities for pre-registration medical and nurse training.

Information to support implementation

More information and resources, a compliance checklist, downloadable labels and warning posters are available at <http://www.npsa.nhs.uk/nrls/alerts-and-directives/rapidrr/> or contact rrr@npsa.nhs.uk or telephone 020 7927 9890.

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