

# Auckland patient dies, two doctors censured

AUCKLAND, June 18 (PA). — Two Auckland doctors have been censured and ordered to pay \$1500 costs each, following the death of a patient at National Women's Hospital last year.

The Medical Practitioners Disciplinary Committee has found Dr I W B Barrowclough, an obstetrician and gynaecologist, and Dr U. M. Denham, an anaesthetist, to be guilty of professional misconduct.

The committee said the patient, Heather Margaret Plaisted, was allergic to the drug suxamethonium, which was recorded on the hospital notes and on a Medic-Alert bracelet worn by her.

## Urgent

Because of bleeding, she required an urgent caesarean section on the evening of October 11 last year.

Dr Barrowclough, the surgeon who had previously attended the patient on six occasions, was sufficiently concerned about the possible adverse effects of suxamethonium upon the patient, to request, from the anaesthetist, Dr Denham, an epidural anaesthetic.

The epidural anaesthetic failed and Doctors Barrowclough and Denham did not consider there was time to re-administer that type of anaesthetic.

Dr Denham then administered a general anaesthetic using the drug suxamethonium.

Although aware of a warning against using the drug on Mrs Plaisted, the committee said Dr Denham did not acquaint herself with the full details available in the hospital notes, nor by discussion with colleagues, the patient, or inquiry of the

Medic-Alert service.

The patient suffered an anaphylactoid reaction after being given the drug and sustained a "profound collapse."

Despite resuscitation measures, she died early on the morning of October 12.

The committee said Dr Barrowclough failed to concern himself with the nature of the anaesthetic used after the epidural was insufficient to enable the operation to proceed.

Being fully aware of the patient's allergy to suxamethonium, he had a duty to ensure that the anaesthetist did not use the drug, or at least that he had clearly reiterated the dangers of its use.

As a senior member of the team the ultimate responsibility rested on him and he was not justified in leaving the decision solely to Dr Denham.

"He displayed a lack of concern and an indifference which was improper and unacceptable from a senior obstetrician and team leader," it said.

"The indifference of Dr

Barrowclough to the drug being used was serious and blatantly careless and inexcusable from an experienced surgeon."

The committee found Dr Barrowclough, as the physician primarily responsible for the patient's welfare, to be guilty of professional misconduct.

The committee said Dr Denham was an "experienced anaesthetist."

She had erred by choosing to ignore the patient's known allergy to suxamethonium, by not seeking further information from the hospital notes, Medic-Alert, or her colleagues and by not employing one of the several alternatives available to her, carrying only slightly greater risks.

"Her failure to consult hospital records adequately or to seek other professional opinions which were available, placed the patient at risk."

Other means of anaesthesia could have been utilised.

The risk Dr Denham had taken was "unacceptable and especially for a highly

qualified and experienced anaesthetist."

"While errors cannot always be avoided in the practice of medicine, or any profession, the errors of Dr Denham were glaring and in totality amount to gross negligence and were inexcusable in the circumstances," the committee said.

"Under no circumstances should she have administered suxamethonium without further inquiry on which, had it been made, would have ensured that the drug would not have been used."

The committee found Dr Denham guilty of professional misconduct.

The committee added: "This was not a situation where a simple error of judgment was made on the part of both practitioners."

## Costs

"In respect of each, they made gross errors over a period of time which fell short, to a substantial degree, of what is expected of special-

ists in their respective fields."

The committee censured both doctors and ordered them to pay \$1500 each for costs incidental to the inquiry.

It ordered that the complainant, the estate of Heather Margaret Plaisted, be awarded costs of \$850 which would be paid by the New Zealand Medical Association.

Dr Barrowclough has appealed against the findings.

The chairman of the Medical Practitioners Disciplinary Committee is Dr D L Richwhite, and also present at the inquiry were Sir Randal Elliott, Dr A C Sandston and Sir Leonard Thornton.

When asked if the doctors were likely to lose their jobs with the Auckland Hospital Board, the medical-superintendent-in-chief, Dr Leslie Honeyman, said the committee did not make its findings known to the employer.

He refused to comment at this stage.