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Doctor: I had to weigh the risks

Star (early Feb)

A woman died from an acute allergic reaction to a drug — even though she wore a medic-alert bracelet warning of the danger.

This was revealed at the Auckland Coroner's Court yesterday during the inquest into the death of Heather Margaret Plaisted (26), of Hobsonville, on October 12.

Mrs Plaisted had been admitted to National Women's Hospital on October 11 suffering a placental abruption, causing haemorrhaging and abdominal pain.

Dr Ian William Boyd Barrowclough, a consultant specialist who had Mrs Plaisted in his care, said that while bleeding initially was not severe, it rapidly increased to become a major haemorrhage.

It was decided to carry out a caesarian. As the patient has a history of sensitivity to the drug suxamethonium, it was decided to give an epidural anaesthetic.

Dr Una Denham, who is chairman of the hospital's anaesthesia department and was on duty at the time, said she read a letter concerning a previous reaction to the drug in Southland in 1978.

She noted Mrs Plaisted wore a medic-alert bracelet saying she was allergic to suxamethonium, but was not aware that this was the result of immunology tests at Auckland in 1980.

At the epidural did not give the required effect, it was decided to administer a general anaesthetic.

Dr Denham re-read the letter concerning the Southland case and felt it was unlikely to have been caused by a reaction to the drug. Suxamethonium was administered because the other muscle relaxants available had a 4-6 minute reaction period.

"I had to weigh up the risks and I knew whatever I did was a risk. But Mrs Plaisted was bleeding severely and would not stop until delivery of the placenta, and the baby was dying.

"So I took a calculated risk because I could see no other alternative at the time."

While the baby was delivered quickly, Mrs Plaisted became cyanosed and cardiac massage was started. She was transferred to Green Lane Hospital at 4.30am and was pronounced dead an hour later.

The coroner, Mr A. D. Copeland, said evidence showed the team faced an emergency where an immediate operation was required.

The anaesthetist thought the medic-alert bracelet had been issued in Southland in 1978 and queried the findings there, as to whether they were true.

According to her evidence, she was not aware the bracelet had resulted from tests in Auckland.

Mr Copeland said a pathologist found no other significant disease which would have caused Mrs Plaisted's death.

He found she died from acute allergic reaction to suxamethonium.