



Public Health
England

Protecting and improving the nation's health

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By email

Alison Mutch, Senior Coroner
c/o [REDACTED]

Our ref: [REDACTED]

11 February 2021

Dear Alison Mutch

Re: Inquest into the death of Leslie Harris on 21st May 2020

Thank you for sending the attached report for Public Health England's (PHE) consideration.

Under the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, please find below PHE's response in relation to the investigation of the death of Leslie Harris

Concern raised

This report states that Mr Harris died of COVID-19 pneumonia acquired whilst an inpatient at Stepping Hill Hospital, contributed to by the complications of an accidental fall. It outlines that the inquest heard that he was moved to a ward where other patients were in isolation from COVID-19 due to the interpretation of Public Health England guidance about management in these circumstances. As a result of reflection and concerns about interpreting the guidance in this way, the trust has changed their policy and such movement no longer takes place. It also states that the Public Health England guidance has not been amended and it was unknown how other trusts were choosing to interpret the guidance as such putting potentially vulnerable patients at risk of developing COVID-19 whilst an in-patient.

Action taken

From the details within the report it is difficult to determine exactly which piece of guidance the trust was using in relation to the care of Mr Harris.

PHE publishes guidance on [management of staff and exposed patients or residents in health and social care settings](#), which contains clear advice on segregation of patients who have been exposed to a patient with COVID-19 infection from patients who have not been exposed to the infection.

[National Infection, Prevention and Control](#) guidance is issued jointly by the four nations. PHE publishes this guidance. Guidance at the time contained information on infection control precautions, including cohorting of patients. This guidance was updated after the sad passing of Mr Harris. Updated versions of the guidance, with most recent updates on 20th August 2020 and 21st January 2021, provide advice on reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission through use of high, medium and low risk COVID-19 risk pathways determined by risk assessment of individuals based on information including test status.

The report states that Mr Harris was put on a bay where patients had been exposed to a COVID-19 patient.

PHE has reviewed and updated this guidance several times as the pandemic has evolved. Guidance published on 4th April 2020 stated that *in-patients who are known to have been exposed to a confirmed COVID-19 patient should be isolated or cohorted until their hospital admission ends, or until 14 days after last exposure* (the recommended isolation period at the time).

The wording was further strengthened on 15th May 2020: *In-patients who are known to have been exposed to a confirmed COVID-19 patient while on the ward (an exposure similar to a household setting), should be isolated or cohorted (grouped together) with other similarly exposed patients who do not have COVID-19 symptoms, until their hospital admission ends or until 14 days after last exposure.*

In the current version of this guidance, a further clarification has been added: *This also applies to in-patients who have previously recovered from COVID-19 and have been exposed to a confirmed COVID-19 case during their hospital stay.*

PHE will be further reviewing this guidance to ensure that wording is tightened to prevent any misinterpretation of the advice.

I would like once again to convey my condolences to the family of Mr Harris and thank you for raising your concerns.

Yours faithfully,
FOI team