

June 2015

Harm from using Low Molecular Weight Heparins when contraindicated

NHS England has issued an alert that harm can occur from using Low Molecular Weight Heparins when contraindicated - <http://www.england.nhs.uk/2015/01/19/psa-heparins/>

Low Molecular Weight Heparins (LMWHs) are frequently used for treatment and for prophylaxis of a variety of thromboembolic conditions. In the 26 months up to March 2014 the National Reporting and Learning System (NRLS) received 75 medication incidents where LMWHs were used despite known contraindications.

Incidents included use of LMWH for either treatment or prophylaxis. Of these, 16 incidents resulted in severe harm or death, 29 involved inappropriately co-prescribed medication, 16 where there was concomitant bleeding, 11 failures to discontinue LMWH and 19 describing a range of other contraindications.

Although there are important benefits from the use of LMWHs, it is vital to assess each patient individually as to whether the benefits outweigh the risks. It is apparent from these incidents that there were missed opportunities to appropriately risk assess the patient for pharmacological or clinical contraindications to the use of LMWHs.

There can be various circumstances when the use of LMWHs may be contraindicated. These can include but are not limited to: active bleeding; acquired bleeding disorder (such as acute liver failure); concurrent use of anticoagulants known to increase risk of bleeding; concurrent use of antiplatelets and other interacting medicines; or, lumbar puncture/epidural/ spinal anaesthesia within the previous four hours, or expected within the next 12 hours.

Actions suggested by NHS England

- Establish if incidents have occurred, or could occur, in your organisation where Low Molecular Weight Heparins have been used despite a known contraindication.
- Consider if immediate action needs to be taken locally and ensure that an action plan is underway, if required, to reduce the risk of further incidents occurring.
- Disseminate this alert to all medical, nursing, pharmacy and other staff who are involved in the prescribing, dispensing and administering of Low Molecular Weight Heparins.
- Share any learning from local investigations or locally developed good practice resources by emailing ENGLAND.Medication-Safety@nhs.net

Please submit comments, solutions, and personal experience to:

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