



HEALTH & DISABILITY COMMISSIONER
TE TOIHAU HAUORA, HAUĀTANGA

Dermatology clinic breached Code after man left badly burnt

22HDC02825

The Health and Disability Commissioner found a dermatology clinic breached the [Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights](#) after a man was left badly burnt.

The man was undergoing a course of phototherapy at the clinic to treat eczema. The treatment exposes the skin to ultraviolet light for a fixed amount of time several times per week.

The man provided his name to an employee when he arrived at the clinic and then confirmed his name a second time as he wanted to ensure the employee had selected his correct patient profile.

The employee then checked the man's treatment with the dermatologist, who examined the man's skin and recommended his treatment dose be reduced. The man's treatment protocol was adjusted in the phototherapy system, and the man received phototherapy treatment for three minutes.

An hour after he left the clinic, the man received a call from the dermatologist advising that he had received the wrong treatment. The dermatologist said the employee, "had opened a folder for a different patient and loaded their treatment," which was much stronger than the man's usual treatment.

The dermatologist apologised and told the man that he would develop bad burns, for which he prescribed aspirin and a topical steroid cream.

The man's skin became increasingly red and hot later that day and by the next morning he developed several blisters on the front of his body. Over the next few days, blistering became worse and covered most of the front of the man's body, from his chin to his waist. He had to take two days off work, due to pain that rendered him bed-bound and unable to carry out daily tasks.

Dr Vanessa Caldwell, Deputy Health and Disability Commissioner, found the clinic breached Right 4 of the Code, for failing to provide services to the man with reasonable care and skill.

"This complaint highlights how crucial it is for healthcare providers to have suitable processes and measures in place to identify patients correctly and ensure they receive their own prescribed treatment," Dr Caldwell said.

“It is important that staff are not only trained to follow a process, but also to understand the purpose and order of steps in that process.”

Dr Caldwell said the clinic responded to the incident appropriately by undertaking an investigation and making several process improvements.

“I commend the clinic’s prompt investigation and its transparency about how the error happened... The changes to the clinic’s processes were specific and appropriate to reduce the risk of the same error happening again. As human error was central to what went wrong, it was fitting that additional training was provided to the employee for the same reason.”

Dr Caldwell made several recommendations to the clinic as outlined in the report, including providing confirmation that the changes indicated have been implemented, and information about the impact of those changes, including confirmation that no further incidents of this nature have occurred since.

24 June 2024

Editor’s notes

Please only use the photo provided with this media release. For any questions about the photo, please contact the communications team.

The full report of this case can be viewed on HDC’s website - see HDC’s '[Latest Decisions](#)'.

Names have been removed from the report to protect privacy of the individuals involved in this case.

The Commissioner will usually name providers and public hospitals found in breach of the Code unless it would not be in the public interest or would unfairly compromise the privacy interests of an individual provider or a consumer. More information for the media, including HDC’s naming policy and why we don't comment on complaints, can be found on our website [here](#).

HDC promotes and protects the rights of people using health and disability services as set out in the [Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights](#) (the Code).

In 2022/23 HDC made 592 quality improvement recommendations to individual complaints and we have a high compliance rate of around 96%.

[Read our latest Annual Report 2023](#)

Health and disability service users can now access an [animated video](#) to help them understand their health and disability service rights under the Code.

Learn more: [Education Publications](#)

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