Hep C dentist struck off

A dentist who concealed from his Torbay patients he suffered from infectious Hepatitis C has been struck off the register.

Swede Sigvard Hicks kept his condition secret from patients, staff and colleagues while working in Torbay, between July 1997 and May 2006. The General Dental Council (GDC) agreed to strike off Mr Hicks after a three-day hearing in London. It upheld five charges against him, including that he failed to take appropriate advice about his condition and to act on it, and did not take adequate precautions to protect patients and colleagues from exposure to the illness.

Former patients have been reassured by local health services that the risk of infection is low and no special measures are being proposed. The trust said it was informed of the situation by the GDC more than a year ago.

Mr Hicks did not attend the London hearing and is now living in Falkenberg, Sweden. GDC chairman Martyn Green said the members, ‘considered suspension but concluded that, by reason of his deceit and his lack of concern for the safety of his patients, the only adequate sanction which adequately reflects the seriousness of Mr Hicks conduct is erasure’.

Torbay Care Trust says the risk of infection is low, and it has been decided not to directly inform former patients. Fiona Tolley, the director of public health, stressed that ‘patients were at no more risk of infection than the general population’. She added that from the moment trust had been made aware of the situation by the GDC 13 months ago, they had sought ‘expert advice from national experts’.

Torbay Care Trust is directing patients towards NHS Direct if they have any questions about their health after being treated by Hicks because they believe the risk to patients is small.

The BDA has explicit guidelines on what dentists must do if they believe they have any condition, which may affect their fitness to practice. An association spokesman said: ‘A dental clinician who believes he or she may be infected with a blood-borne virus or other infection has an ethical responsibility to obtain medical advice, including any necessary testing. If a clinician is found to be infected, further medical advice and counselling must be sought.’

‘Changes to clinical practice may be required and may include ceasing or restricting practice, the exclusion of exposure-prone procedures or other modifications. An infected clinician must not rely on his or her own assessment of the possible risks to their patients. Failure to obtain appropriate advice or act upon the advice given would almost certainly lead to a charge of serious professional misconduct.’

The chairman Mr Green said at the hearing: ‘The committee has found that Mr Hicks’s conduct in concealing his condition and in failing to take adequate action to protect his patients and colleagues was less than honest. He put his own interests above those of his patients and colleagues.’

GDC Council chamber.

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