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'Life or death' Ministry warning

HOSPITAL DRUG ALERT AS 5 DIE

Race to find 500 drip-feed bottles

DAILY TELEGRAPH REPORTERS

A "LIFE or death" hunt for 500 bottles of dextrose drip-feed solution was ordered last night by the Department of Health as emergency inquiries began into the recent deaths of five patients at Devonport hospital, Plymouth.

The patients had all been given the solution manufactured by Evans Medical Ltd., of Speke, Liverpool. In a joint statement the firm and the Department of Health said a batch of the solution may have been contaminated.

About 660 bottles of the suspect solution were distributed in May—and only 156 have been traced so far. A Health Department spokesman said: "This is a matter of life and death.

"We have moved as fast as possible to get the widest possible warnings out about the danger of this batch of the solution in the national interest."

"It is vital for everyone stocking this solution to make sure that not even a single bottle from the suspect batch is allowed to be used. Every bottle on the shelves must be checked."

The suspect batch is the 5 per cent. dextrose solution marked D 1192/C.

It is fed through the veins of hospital patients who cannot eat, including those who have just had major operations.

Mixed delivery

The Department of Health say bottles of the solution are normally distributed in boxes of twelve and it is possible that a warehouseman making up deliveries could have mixed bottles from the contaminated batch with bottles from unaffected batches.

As experts at the Devonport Hospital, Plymouth, began their inquiry into the five deaths last night, a South Western Regional Hospital Board spokesman said the patients had "one common denominator." Each had been given an infusion of the 5 per cent. dextrose solution manufactured by Evans Medical Ltd.

But there was nothing to say these people did not die from other causes, he added.

Two other patients in Devonport hospital are believed to be suffering from the effects of an infusion with the dextrose. One is understood to be seriously ill.

Four of the Devonport hospital patients who died were men and their names have not yet been disclosed. The fifth, was Mrs Gillian Myatt, 33, mother of two children, who lived at Acre Place, Stoke, Plymouth.

Death mystery

When the inquest on Mrs Myatt opened yesterday at Plymouth, Dr A. C. Hunt, consultant pathologist, said he could give no cause for her death.

He told the coroner: "Information was given to me that the batch of infusion fluid supplied to the hospital was dangerously contaminated."

Asked why Mrs Myatt died, Dr Hunt replied: "It possibly was due as a result of being given some of that fluid."

He added that the fluid was a proprietary brand supplied to many hospitals.

The coroner, Mr W. E. J. Major, was told that Mrs Myatt went into the hospital on February 25 and died on March 1.

Dr Hunt said that death was due to collapse following an operation for thrombosis in an artery in the left leg. The dextrose solution fed to Mrs Myatt was suspected by one of the doctors at the hospital and he asked for it to be examined.

Difficult to recognise

In answer to questions from the coroner, Dr Hunt agreed that if any other patients died as a result of the contaminated solution, their bodies would have been disposed of by now.

The condition would be very difficult to recognise, and death would have been accounted for by natural causes.

The inquest on Mrs Myatt was adjourned.

Later, announcing the hospital inquiry, Mr Major said the five deaths had been comparatively recent. The bodies had either been buried or cremated.

"We must bear in mind—as Dr Hunt said at the inquest—that it is quite possible the persons who may have had an injection of this stuff may have been so seriously ill that they would have died anyway.

"As Dr Hunt again told me, they would not have had this injection unless they had been seriously ill."

Mr Eric Sewell, spokesman for the South West Regional Hospital Board, said last night: "It is possible that other hospitals which have been using this batch of solution may be alerted to examine recent case histories of people who have died."

Asked if people who had been given infusions from the suspect solution and had now left hospital were considered to be at any risk, Mr Sewell said: "This is what any inquiries are all about.

"If the alert detective work carried out at Devonport hospital is followed in the same way, the answer might not take too long to find—one way or another."

Dr Denis Cahal, senior principal medical officer at the Department of Health, said on television last night that the distribution of the faulty solution was "just a human error—one of those accidents which sometimes occur."

Dr Cahal said that it would be about two days before all the bottles of batch D 1192/C were located. Most of them were believed to be in south-west England.

Joint statement

The joint statement issued last night by the Department of Health and the dextrose manufacturer, Evans Medical, said:

A sub-batch of 5 per cent. dextrose solution for intravenous feeding, manufactured by Evans Medical Ltd., of Speke, Liverpool, is suspected of being faulty.

The sub-batch number is D 1192/C and it was distributed in May, 1971.

The manufacturers have taken all possible steps to ensure that any bottles remaining from this sub-batch, which originally consisted of approximately 660 bottles, be returned to them.

So far 156 bottles have been accounted for and an unknown number may have been used since the sub-batch was issued.

The Department of Health and Social Security ask all hospital pharmacies, wholesale pharmacists, doctors and any other people who have in their possession any 5 per cent. dextrose solution manufactured by Evans of Speke, to check their stocks immediately and to return any bearing the number D 1192/C to the manufacturers.

They should not use any of the preparations bearing this number in any circumstances.

Glaxo subsidiary

Evans Medical Ltd. was founded nearly 200 years ago and is now a Glaxo subsidiary.

It manufactures several hundred lines of standard drugs for hospitals and the pharmaceutical trade. Few of its products can be bought over the counter at a chemists.

A spokesman said last night that 5 per cent. dextrose solution was purely restricted to hospital use and could not be bought at High Street pharmacies.

Guy's Hospital said last night that it had received the warning from the Department of Health, but that it did not have any 5 per cent. dextrose in stock.

A spokesman at St. Thomas' said an immediate check was being made.

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