

After-hours pathology: Unexpected critical results

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In times of increasing patient demands coupled with doctors' expectations of more balance in their working conditions and private lives, it is not unusual for practices to refer patients calling after hours to deputising services or to public hospitals. However this may provide a difficulty for the pathology laboratory if a routinely requested test unexpectedly returns a potentially life-threatening result.

Laboratories provide analytical services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Occasionally, a critical result will emerge during the evening, long after the referring surgery has closed for the day. Under these circumstances, the laboratory will attempt to alert the requesting doctor regarding the potential risk to the patient.

In some cases however, the laboratory is unable to reach the doctor because the practice answering service refers callers elsewhere and the doctor's after-hours number is unknown. Hospitals and deputising services are at a disadvantage in treating such a patient in circumstances where the patient's clinical details are unknown. Indeed most deputising services will decline to act when contact is initiated by the laboratory.

If no doctor involved in current management of the patient can be contacted, one of the pathologists from the laboratory will contact the patient directly and suggest that he/she should present to a local hospital for medical attention.

Clearly this is far from ideal. A patient receiving a telephone call at an unusual time from an unfamiliar doctor is often very suspicious or frightened, regardless of the nature of the identified laboratory abnormality.

I have discussed this situation with a representative of the Medical Board of Queensland and I have been informed that ethically, doctors are required to be contactable after hours for critical events such as these. Section 3.2 of the Medical Board's Good Medical Practice document states:

You should be satisfied that when you are off duty suitable arrangements are made for your patient's medical care.

However this is not as onerous as it might at first seem. Of the range of 2000 or more tests which are routinely available and performed in the laboratory, only a handful require immediate intervention if sufficiently abnormal.

If an abnormal finding would be unlikely to prompt any change in management prior to the treating doctor's return to practice, then it is not deemed to be worthy of disturbing the doctor after hours.

If a particular abnormal finding has been identified previously in the same patient in the recent past, again it is not seen as warranting after-hours contact with the treating doctor.

Finally, if the clinical notes on the request form indicate that the condition is known to the doctor, the finding is not phoned to the treating doctor's home.

Indeed of the more than eight thousand routine patient requests which pass through this laboratory on a daily basis, fewer than five per night reveal a result which requires anything other than routine reporting. On average, no doctor should expect to be called after hours more than once every few years. But when a call becomes necessary, it is certainly more satisfactory if the patient contact is made by the treating doctor.

To help pathology laboratories to assist you in your ongoing care obligations to your patients, your cooperation in providing your after-hours contact details would assist us greatly. Please be assured that such details will be kept strictly confidential and would only be used for the above stated purpose.

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