



Kent

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2024;385:q838<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.q838>

Published: 10 April 2024

Steroids: Trust failed to inform patient who had psychotic episode about side effects, says ombudsman

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A man who experienced a psychotic episode that lasted for weeks should have been informed of the potential extreme side effects of taking steroids, England's health ombudsman has said.

The ombudsman partially upheld a complaint against Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust for not following relevant guidelines and for missing the opportunity to inform the 61 year old patient about the potential side effects from the medicine.

Andrew Holland had prednisolone prescribed by Manchester Royal Eye Hospital after losing vision in his left eye and developing a severe infection in his right eye. He soon began experiencing disrupted sleep and severe headaches. He then developed more serious side effects, including becoming aggressive and psychotic, wandering into the street at night, and hallucinating.

"I was seeing all sorts. It was crazy," he said. "There was a bear at the end of the garden one day and a burglar coming over the garage roof."

Holland visited hospital several times because of his symptoms and then attended Manchester University's emergency department in mid-January 2022. He later became an inpatient and was given a diagnosis of steroid induced psychosis. He attended the trust again in early February, where doctors diagnosed steroid psychosis and advised him to stop taking the medicine. Later that month he was taken to another trust, where he was described as having steroid psychosis and was eventually discharged in mid-February when the psychotic episode stopped.

The ombudsman found no failings with the trust for prescribing the steroids for Holland's eye condition but said that there had been a "missed opportunity" to fully inform him of potential side effects. The trust had also not acknowledged the mistakes in communication about the side effects or made any attempt to correct them.

The ombudsman recommended that the trust pay £700 in compensation to the patient and write to apologise for the distress and anxiety caused. The trust should also produce an action plan on how it will learn and improve from the case.

Rebecca Hilsenrath, chief executive of the parliamentary and health service ombudsman, said, "This must have been a terrifying experience. It is an act of trust to put yourself under the care of others, and trust depends on information and understanding. No one wants to suffer a psychotic episode; no one should do so as a result of medication without fully understanding and accepting the risk."

A spokesperson for Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust said, "We would again [like to] apologise to Mr Holland for this incident two years ago, where the care we provided didn't meet the high standards which we expect. We have made changes since that time, but we will carefully study the ombudsman's ruling to assess if more learning can be taken from it to further improve our services."