Critical results reporting –
a medico-legal view

Dr Michael Devlin
*Head of professional standards and liaison, MDU*

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What we will cover

- Concepts of responsibility and liability
- Practical considerations
- Massachusetts Coalition guidelines
Responsibility and liability

- Terms can be confusing
- A professional is responsible for his or her actions or decisions
- In civil claims within the NHS, the employing trust is vicariously liable for its staff
- Where there is a criminal allegation there is usually individual liability
- There is individual liability to professional regulators
- Employees will be individually liable under trust disciplinary proceedings
Communicating results

- Prescriber
- Lab staff
- Ward staff
Potential for error

- More stages/intermediaries may increase the risk of error
- Transcription error may creep in when telephone results taken
- Failure to categorise importance/urgency
- Failure to identify who can take definitive action on result
- Wrong decision despite prompt, accurate receipt of information
In the lab setting

- Professional responsibility
  - What do local guidelines and protocols say
  - What professional standards does your professional regulator require
  - Do focus on the patient: safety is paramount
  - Avoid collusion of anonymity
  - Design processes with input from all those likely to be affected by it
Massachusetts Coalition – the “what”

**Red**
- Immediate danger of mortality or morbidity
- Direct notification to someone who can intervene

**Amber**
- Highly significant, not immediately threatening
- Notification by a high priority process within several hours

**Yellow**
- May be significant if treatment not initiated in a timely manner
- Notification within three days

Massachusetts Coalition – the “how”

Safe practice recommendations cover the following areas:

- Who should receive the results
- Who should receive results when ordering clinician is not available
- What results require timely and reliable communication
- When the results should be actively reported to the clinician within defined timescales
- How to notify the clinician
- How to design, support and maintain the systems involved

Massachusetts Coalition safeguards can be accessed free on their website at: 
http://www.macoalition.org/communicating-critical-test-results.shtml
Summary points

- Errors will occur – a good system will reduce their occurrence to a minimal level
- Too many intermediaries risks error
- Define what is critical (e.g. red/amber/yellow)
- Are you speaking to the decision maker?
- Consider routinely noting name and getting read-back where telephone is used
- Constantly audit and improve – use patient safety incidents as catalysts for change
How to contact us

Membership
  t  0800 716 376
  e  membership@themdu.com

Advisory
  t  0800 716 646
  e  advisory@themdu.com

Website
themdu.com

@the_mdu
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