

Possible infection risk for heart operation patients at Royal Infirmary

NHS Lothian has contacted patients who had heart aortic valve replacement operations at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh in the last six months to advise them of a possible infection risk.

The decision was taken by an Incident Management Team which was convened following notification of an unusual case of heart valve infection. Heart valve infection is known as endocarditis. The team conducted an extensive review of the infection records of thousands of patients who had many different types of surgery carried out since the beginning of 2015.

The team found that six patients who underwent cardio thoracic surgery over a period of 18 months were affected by unusual infections caused by micro organisms commonly found in the environment. It is thought these may have been acquired during surgery. Of the small number of patients affected, sadly some later died.

No cases were found prior to March 2017 and there have been no known cases in patients operated on since November 2018. As a precaution however, four planned surgeries have been cancelled this week to allow for specialist cleaning and disinfection of the theatres used for this type of procedure. Enhanced infection control measures have also been put in place.

Professor Alex McMahon, NHS Lothian Executive Lead for Infection Control said: "We extend our sincere apologies and deepest condolences to the families of the patients who died, all of whom were informed at the time of their treatment that they had an unusual and difficult to treat infection.

Commenting on the decision to contact all patients who have had this procedure over the last six months, he said: "We know this will be a worrying time for those who have received letters but we have contacted patients purely as a precaution. The risk is very low and we do not anticipate any more cases, however we know that it can take up to six months for these infections to materialise. We want to make sure those patients know what symptoms to be aware of and to contact NHS Inform if they have any concerns.

"Many patients receiving this type of surgery are already very ill and vulnerable to infection so we place the highest importance on a stringent infection prevention and control regime.

"We are very sorry for the inconvenience and disappointment caused to the patients who have had their procedures cancelled this week but we must prioritise patient safety above all else. All those affected will be given new appointments as soon as possible."



Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh