Checking pregnancy before surgery

Issue
The possibility of pregnancy should be considered in all relevant female patients* before surgery which could pose risks to mother or fetus. Preoperative assessment may take place weeks in advance of the planned operation and pregnancy status may change during the intervening time. The practice of checking and documenting current pregnancy status in the immediate preoperative period is inconsistent. Not all women at present have pregnancy status checked before surgery.

If a previously unknown pregnancy is detected, the risks and benefits of the surgery can be discussed with the patient. Surgery may be postponed or anaesthetic and surgical approaches modified if necessary. In emergency situations, confirmation of pregnancy should not delay treatment and should be judged within clinical assessment of risk.

Evidence of harm
Between October 2003 and November 2009, the National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) received 42 reports of patients undergoing a planned procedure without having a documented pregnancy check in the preoperative period. In three cases there was a spontaneous abortion following the procedure.

Reducing the risk of harm
This RRR reminds NHS organisations that existing preoperative assessment policies must include a check of possible pregnancy in the immediate preoperative period. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) issued guidelines on pre-operative testing in 2003; these are due for review in June 2010. NICE recommends pregnancy testing for women who say it is possible they could be pregnant. Testing may also be considered for other women. Informed consent should be obtained for testing. Other relevant guidance includes the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists guidelines on obtaining consent (RCOG, 2008) and advice on checking pregnancy status before exposure to ionising radiation (Health Protection Agency, 2009) – see supporting information for details.

For IMMEDIATE ACTION by organisations undertaking surgery in the NHS and the independent sector
Deadline for ACTION COMPLETE is 28 October 2010

1. Local preoperative assessment policies should be reviewed to ensure that pregnancy status is checked within the immediate preoperative period in accordance with NICE guidelines.
2. The check should be recorded on preoperative documentation used by staff performing final clinical and identity checks before surgical intervention.
3. Organisations should demonstrate robust reporting of incidents where pregnancy checks have not happened and any associated actions that may come from this (which may include local audit).

*Normally all women who are menstruating, excluding surgery after miscarriage and other exceptions [see supporting information].

Further information on this Rapid Response Report is available at www.nrls.npsa.nhs.uk/alerts. Further queries should be directed to rrr@npsa.nhs.uk, telephone 020 7927 9890.

The NPSA has informed NHS organisations, the independent sector, commissioners, regulators and relevant professional bodies.

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