Leighton returns to register but remains suspended from work

By Petra Kendall-Raynor

The nurse arrested and then released over suspicious patient deaths at Stepping Hill Hospital in Stockport says she is determined to return to work after being reinstated to the register last week.

A Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) panel ruled that Rebecca Leighton could continue to practise with conditions. She is however prevented from nursing as she remains suspended from work.

The NMC panel overturned its 18-month suspension and ruled that Ms Leighton could continue to practise but only at Stepping Hill.

Other conditions include a ban on her holding drugs keys for any ward, department or nursing team, and she is not allowed to order medicinal products or administer them unless supervised. The conditions will be reviewed next year.

Ms Leighton was arrested in July as part of a police investigation into contaminated saline. After six weeks in prison, she was released when the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) dropped charges of criminal damage with intent to endanger life.

However, the NMC hearing heard that flucloxacillin, ibuprofen and tramadol had been found at her home.

An NMC spokesperson said: ‘The panel considers that the theft of these drugs is a serious allegation which, if proven, could call into question the honesty and integrity of the registrant.’

Ms Leighton, who was present at the hearing but spoke only through her barrister, declined to reveal whether the drugs had been prescribed to her or belonged to the hospital.

Speaking after the hearing, Ms Leighton said: ‘The CPS has dropped all charges and I hoped the NMC would take this into account and allow me to go back to the job I love without any conditions.’

A Stepping Hill spokesperson confirmed Ms Leighton’s suspension on full pay and added: ‘The trust will now undertake its own review of the allegations relating to the theft of some medications.’

Further investigation

The RCN, which is representing Ms Leighton, welcomed the removal of the interim suspension order, but said it was disappointed with the conditions of practice. However, NMC chief executive Dickon Weir-Hughes said: ‘The panel considered that, although the charges of criminal damage intending to endanger life had been discontinued, there was still compelling evidence related to the theft of medication. Regardless of other circumstances related to the case, the theft of drugs is a matter of serious professional misconduct that demands full investigation.’

It emerged during the hearing that Greater Manchester Police asked the NMC for details of five other nurses at the hospital when it began its inquiries into suspicious deaths.

An NMC spokesperson confirmed that the regulator is not investigating any other nurses in relation to the case.

Greater Manchester Police are investigating three deaths and 30 other cases in which it is alleged that patients received contaminated saline solution.

HOW MARY SEACOLE STATUE MIGHT LOOK

Computer-generated graphics of a statue commemorating the life of black nurse Mary Seacole are now on display. The graphics were unveiled last week as part of an exhibition detailing the statue’s specifications and costings.

Campaigners aim to raise £500,000 for the bronze memorial, to be placed at St Thomas’ Hospital in London. So far the Mary Seacole Memorial Statue Appeal, chaired by Lord Soley, has raised more than £100,000.

The fund received a boost when the reggae band Toots and the Maytals donated £2 per ticket from a recent gig at the Brixton Academy.

For details of the Mary Seacole Memorial Statue Appeal and to make a donation go to www.maryseacoleappeal.org.uk