



19 May 2022

## **RQIA Makes Recommendations to Help Prevent Choking Deaths**

Today, (Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> May) RQIA has published its independent Review of the implementation of recommendations to prevent choking incidents in Northern Ireland.

The Review examined the measures and governance arrangements in place to prevent choking, in line with current guidance, focusing on the work undertaken in high-risk areas across health and social care, including stroke care, care of the elderly and services for those with physical and or Mental Health and Learning Disabilities.

The Review found that there was a clear and urgent need to improve the quality and safety of care provided to people at risk of choking. It reported that between 2016 and 2021 there had been 21 deaths from choking and noted that while a Best Practice Guidance Letter, to improve the safety of care for people who are at risk of choking, was issued in February last year, since then, there had been a further 10 deaths from choking across Northern Ireland.

The key recommendations in the Review include: training for staff including clinicians, catering and domestic teams; shorter waiting times for assessment by Speech and Language Therapy; better systems for communication between staff, and safer systems for ordering and storing food.

Welcoming the publication of the review, RQIA Chief Executive, Briege Donaghy said: **“People with difficulty in eating, drinking, and swallowing (“EDS”) suffer both from a reduced quality of life and real risk of harm including, tragically, loss of life. The vast majority of those who die from choking are known to have a swallowing difficulty. Many already have a care plan in place, however choking incidents may occur due to failures in communication of the care plan, and when people are inadvertently provided with, or are able to access, food and drink that is not suitable or safe for them. They and their families and carers must receive good quality guidance, along with practical support, to ensure their safety and a good quality of life.**

**“This Review examined how the guidance is being implemented and makes 12 recommendations, which if fully implemented, will ensure better outcomes for people living with eating, drinking and swallowing difficulties and should see a reduction in choking-related harm. RQIA will work with the Trusts and others to make sure that this guidance, is implemented where it matters, on the ground.”**

Commenting on the review, The Department of Health's Chief Allied Health Professions Officer, Prof Suzanne Martin, said: **"The Department of Health welcomes the publication of this review. We are committed to working with the RQIA, HSC Trusts and providers of health and social care to support improvement, and to ensure better and safer outcomes for people at risk of choking."**

Ms Donaghy thanked the expert review team led by RQIA's Clinical Lead Dr Leanne Morgan, the healthcare professionals and staff across the Trusts and care sector, the patients and the families who participated in the review.

**ENDS**

## **NOTES TO EDITORS**

The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) is the independent body responsible for regulating, inspecting, and reviewing the quality and availability of health and social care services in Northern Ireland. RQIA's reviews identify best practice, highlight gaps or shortfalls in services requiring improvement and protect the public interest. Reviews are supported by a core team of staff and by independent assessors, who are either experienced practitioners or experts by experience. Our reports are submitted to the Minister for Health and are available on our website at [www.rqia.org.uk](http://www.rqia.org.uk).

- Being able to eat and drink what we want is something that most people take for granted. However, for people with swallowing difficulties, food and drink can present a danger that impacts on their daily lives.
- People at higher risk of choking include those who have suffered a stroke; older people; those with mental health or learning disabilities; and those with neurodegenerative conditions.
- Many use specific health services, or Day Care and Respite facilities. They and their families and carers must receive good quality guidance, along with practical support, if risks are to be reduced and quality of life enhanced.
- The PHA/HSC Board guidance (February 2021) made six recommendations, based on learning from previous choking incidents.
- RQIA reviewed the effectiveness of systems for delivery of care and prevention of choking-related harm and found that there is a need for:
  - training for all relevant staff groups including catering and domestic teams
  - shorter waiting times for assessment by Speech and Language Therapy
  - better systems for communication between staff
  - safer systems for ordering and storing food
- The pandemic has contributed to unprecedented staffing shortages and this has made the provision of safe, effective care much more challenging. There is now a need for a sustained and co-ordinated effort to strengthen the systems for patient safety across the region.
- RQIA's review makes 12 recommendations for improvement in the systems of delivery of care to those with Eating, Drinking and Swallowing (EDS) difficulties.

The full report will be available at [www.rqia.org.uk](http://www.rqia.org.uk) from 19 May 2022:

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