FAQ

Q: What happened?
A: On December 5, 2018, Mount Carmel, our regional health ministry in Columbus, Ohio, reported to authorities the findings of an investigation we launched into patient care by a Mount Carmel doctor who, until recently, worked with patients requiring intensive care.

Our investigation determined that over the last four years, the doctor ordered significantly excessive and potentially fatal doses of pain medication for at least 26 patients at Mount Carmel West and at least one patient at Mount Carmel St. Ann's who were near death and receiving intensive care. These patients' families had requested that all life-saving measures be stopped.

Following the discovery, the doctor was removed from all patient care and his employment was terminated. We're working hard to learn all we can about these cases, and we removed 20 other hospital staff from providing further patient care while we gather more facts. This includes a number of nurses who administered the medication and a number of staff pharmacists who were also involved in the related patient care.

Q: How many doctors, nurses and pharmacists were involved?
A: Following the discovery, the doctor was removed from all patient care and his employment was terminated. We're working hard to learn all we can about these cases, and we removed 20 other hospital staff from providing further patient care while we gather more facts. This includes a number of nurses who administered the medication and a number of staff pharmacists who were also involved in the related patient care.

The acts of this doctor were a clear violation of how Mount Carmel – or any Trinity Health Ministry – cares for patients. The significantly excessive and potentially fatal doses ordered by the doctor went beyond providing comfort.

Q: How did you find out about these actions?
A: We first became alerted to this situation because a colleague met their responsibilities under Mount Carmel's High-Reliability initiative and reported concerns about the level of pain medication being administered to a patient. We launched an internal investigation that determined that violations of Mount Carmel's policies had taken place.

Q: How have Mount Carmel Health and Trinity Health responded?
A: After discovering these actions, we took direct measures to ensure patient safety and address this tragedy. Along with removing the doctor and 20 hospital staff from caring for patients, we reported the results of our investigation to the appropriate authorities. We're continuing to investigate this matter in full cooperation with authorities, including law enforcement.

We grieve with these families, and we are reaching out to apologize, explain what happened and answer any questions and concerns they may have. Our thoughts and prayers are with the involved patients and their families, and we ask for their forgiveness. Out of respect for these families' privacy, we are keeping all conversations and related actions confidential.

Our integrated Trinity Health and Mount Carmel team is identifying immediate root causes as well as steps we can take to ensure that our best-practice care guidelines are followed moving forward. So far, these include a new escalation policy for increases in pain medication dosing and a new approval process for pain medication at high doses during similar situations.
Q: Is it possible that there were more than 27 patients involved and that other instances could have occurred more than four years ago?
A: We’re reviewing additional records to determine if other patients were affected.

Q: Were these patients terminally ill?
A: The patients involved were near death and receiving intensive care. As part of Mount Carmel and Trinity Health’s commitment to people-centered care, we are dedicated to providing compassionate care that takes into account the decisions of patients and their families. We believe in helping patients who are near death die peacefully and naturally. We provide treatment that ensures dignity and provides comfort to patients during this critical stage of life.

In these cases, the patients’ families had requested that all life-saving measures be stopped. Our protocol in that circumstance is to offer comfort care, in which appropriate doses of medication are administered as needed. While that may slow breathing and hasten death as a secondary result, it’s not the same as administering an excessive dose of medication, which is not necessary to alleviate suffering. The doses ordered by this doctor went beyond providing comfort; they were significantly excessive and potentially fatal.

Q: What are the Mount Carmel and Trinity Health policies for dosing pain control medicine for patients who are near death?
A: As part of our commitment to people-centered care, we are dedicated to providing compassionate care that takes into account the decisions of patients and their families. We believe in helping patients who are near death die peacefully and naturally. We provide treatment that ensures dignity and provides comfort to patients during this critical stage of life.

In these cases, the patients’ families had requested that all life-saving measures be stopped. Our protocol in that circumstance is to offer comfort care, in which appropriate doses of medication are administered as needed. While that may slow breathing and hasten death as a secondary result, it’s not the same as intentionally administering an excessive dose of medication, which is not necessary to alleviate suffering. The doses ordered by this doctor went beyond providing comfort; they were significantly excessive and potentially fatal.

Q: When do you expect to be finished with your internal investigation?
A: Our investigation is ongoing, and it will continue until we are satisfied we have as many answers as possible as to how these events occurred. We are committed to sharing information when we can and doing the right thing.

Q: Are you confident that no other doctors or nurses within Mount Carmel or throughout Trinity Health have taken similar actions with patients?
A: We do not believe any other Mount Carmel doctors or nurses have taken similar actions with patients, however, our investigation is ongoing. We have received no reports or indications that similar events have occurred at other Trinity Health hospitals.

Q: Did your internal investigation attempt to determine whether anyone outside of the doctor, and 20 nurses and pharmacists were aware, or suspected, that significantly excessive and potentially fatal doses were administered and did not report this? If not, why not?
A: We are still in the midst of our internal investigation and one of the things we are looking to identify through this process is whether any other team members were aware of the situation.
Q: Is this type of behavior an issue at other Trinity Health hospitals? Are you investigating this in other ministries?
A: We have received no reports or indications that similar events have occurred at other Trinity Health hospitals, and we are looking at medication orders across the system to ensure patients are receiving appropriate doses of these medications. We are also sharing what we’ve learned at Mount Carmel to help our other hospitals prevent this from happening.

Q: What is High-Reliability?
A: Mount Carmel – like many Trinity Health ministries – is on a journey to achieving Zero Harm. One of the critical parts of that journey is for Mount Carmel to become a High-Reliability organization. High-Reliability organizations develop a culture and organizational framework that prioritizes safety in complex systems. This journey includes key aspects – a mindfulness of the potential for error, reluctance to simplify, and resilience. Over the last 18 months, Mount Carmel colleagues have undergone training toward the aim of becoming a High-Reliability organization. While it is clearly unacceptable that these actions went unreported for so long, the situation was ultimately uncovered because one of our colleagues stepped forward and reported their concern for patient safety, as is required of an organization that embraces the principles of High-Reliability. We are proud of the progress we’ve made, but this event clearly shows us we have more work to do and that we must redouble our efforts toward Zero Harm in all care.