

Gosport hospital deaths t get public inquiry at last

Ten years after a 'death audit' was triggered by claims of opiate overuse, ministers are set to

By Nina Lakhani

An independent inquiry into the deaths of dozens of elderly patients given "life-shortening" powerful painkillers at a Hampshire hospital will be announced by ministers within weeks.

The inquiry will address the findings of a damning audit into deaths at Gosport War Memorial Hospital published last month, a senior government figure told *The Independent* on Sunday.

The audit by Professor Richard Baker, a patient safety expert from the University of Leicester who also worked on the Harold Shipman inquiry, found morphine and other powerful sedatives were routinely prescribed to elderly patients in Gosport between 1988 and 2000, even if they were not in pain.

A "remarkably high" proportion of patients were given opiate injections before death, the Baker report states. The "routine" use of these powerful drugs "almost certainly shortened the lives of some patients", some of whom might have survived their illness and been "discharged from hospital alive".

Professor Baker's recommendations included investigations into individual deaths, and a study of shift patterns to ascertain whether deaths were linked to particular nurses and doctors.

Serious concerns about the liberal use of opiates among elderly patients at Gosport were first reported by nurses in 1991, but continued for another decade. Complaints from families in 1998 eventually led to three police investigations, 11 belated inquests and a professional misconduct hearing.

The Baker report was suppressed by the Department of Health for almost 10 years on the grounds that it could interfere with these proceedings. The report has reignited families' calls for an independent



The Gosport hospital. Below: *The 105* breaks the story in March 2009 CHRIS ISON/PA

Hampshire Police were contacted in August 1998 by Mrs Mackenzie reporting that her mother Gladys Richards was prescribed morphine "no obvious signs of pain".

Professor Brian Livesey, an elderly care expert, concluded: "As a result of these drugs, Mrs Richards was lawfully killed." Treasurer took the view that his were "flawed in respect of the law". In August 2009, the CPS said there was insufficient evidence for a successful prosecution.

The Baker "death audit" was commissioned by the Chief Officer in 2002 as another investigation - this time into "suspicious" deaths at the hospital - got underway. A tearful and forensic experts revealed "serious concerns" about the deaths to the police. The CPS closed the case.

In 2009 an inquest into the deaths of patients given painkillers and other sedatives was "inappropriately" presided over by a judge. The patients who contributed to the deaths. In 2010 the General Council found Dr Jane Barton, a clinical assistant between 1989 and 2000, guilty of "multiple instances of professional misconduct". The widespread anger was placed under restriction. Ms Barton, who always acted in the best interests of the patients, removed from the medical register.

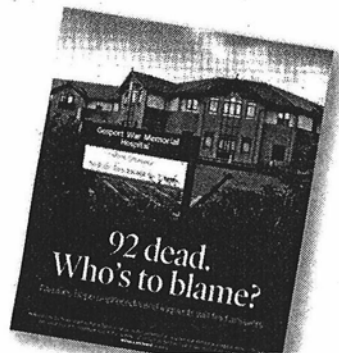
Mrs Mackenzie last year said: "After all these years we would welcome an independent inquiry. Not just into the deaths but also into how the police handled the case, why crucial evidence was not submitted at the inquests, and to the CPS, so that we can know everything."

'I'm exploring options for how we can establish all the facts'

NORMAN LAMB MP
Minister for Care and Support

'Why was crucial evidence not allowed at the inquests?'

GILLIAN MACKENZIE
Daughter of Gladys Richards, who died in 1998



inquiry into the deaths and subsequent "flawed" investigations which were mired by delays.

The senior source said an inquiry should also examine confidential documents held by the police, Crown Prosecution Service, NHS and government departments, so relatives' outstanding questions and cover-up allegations could be addressed.

At least two forensic medical experts who investigated the deaths on behalf of Hampshire Police a decade ago have spoken to government officials in recent weeks.

Norman Lamb, Minister for Care and Support, who in opposition campaigned for a Shipman-style public inquiry into the Gosport deaths in this newspaper, said in a statement yesterday: "I am exploring options for how we can establish all the facts in relation to this scandal. I am deeply concerned by the findings of the Baker report." He added: "I am also conscious that a lot of documents remain unpublished. I want openness so we can establish all of the facts."

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