

PROBE: Relatives relieved after fears over inquiries into deaths are followed up by Police Cor

Review launched into investigation of hospital deaths

By Nicholas Brooks
The News

A TOP detective from Somerset will probe complaints about a police investigation into a series of deaths at Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

Avon and Somerset police have been called in by the Police Complaints Authority (PCA) to review an investigation carried out by then Detective Superintendent John James between April 2001 and February 2002.

During that time 11 families voiced concerns about the deaths of their elderly relatives to the police, but formal statements were never taken, they said.

They complained that their suspicions about deaths at the hospital were not treated seriously, and were rejected without proper investigation.

Angry at what they saw as the failure of Gosport police to take their fears seriously, six families went to

COMPLEX CASE HAS EXTENDED PROBE



John James

The Police Complaints Authority was set up in 1985 in the wake of the Brixton riots, when complaints about the police could only be handled by the force itself.

Members – who have never served with the police – sit in judgment when accusations are made against officers. Typical cases might involve deaths of pedestrians during police chases, or shootings by officers.

Judgments are usually made within 128 days, but the Gosport case has taken far longer because it involves dozens of people, and is spread over five years.

When the investigation is over, the complainants are told of the verdict and disciplinary action can be taken against officers.

Cases involving possible crimes by officers can go to the Crown Prosecution Service.

the PCA last year.

Now, 18 months later, Avon and Somerset CID chief Dave Johnson has been drafted in 'to review the investigation'.

This probe is unrelated to a new police investigation into claims of suspicious deaths at Gosport War Memorial Hospital, which involve 62 families.

Alison MacDougall of the PCA, in charge of the allegations, said: 'At the time, be-

fore the Harold Shipman case, there weren't well-established rules for handling cases like these,' she said.

'This is a complex and sensitive case which does not arise very often, so judging how it was handled needs a level of professional expertise only the police can provide.'

Gill MacKenzie, whose mother Gladys Richards died at the Gosport hospital

in 1998, welcomed the move.

'I have no intention of giving up the fight for my case to be fully exposed, and I hope that this is in court,' she said.

She added that officers carrying out the new police probe had still not taken a statement from her.

Another family member, who did not wish to be named, said: 'I am very pleased somebody has been brought in because it shows it is being treated seriously.'

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Families' five-year battle over death claims

■ Suspicions about deaths at the hospital were first raised in 1998 by one family, and Gosport CID was approached in October that year.

■ The police decided there was no case to answer, but after complaints another investigation began. In February 1999 it was again declared that there was no case.

■ Complaints about the police approach were made to the PCA in April 1999 – and two years later upheld.

■ The next police probe lasted from October 1999 to December 2000, but in

July the following year the Crown Prosecution Service threw out the case.

■ Detective Superintendent John James took charge of the case from May 2001 to February 2002 – during which time 11 families expressed fears about their relatives' deaths.

■ In February 2002 these families were told that no further investigation was planned.

■ In April 2002 these families went back to the PCA to complain about what they saw as police inactivity.

■ In July 2002 government health

inspectors published a report slamming the hospital's failure to monitor drugs given to patients properly. Patients were put at risk, it concluded.

■ In September 2002 Professor Richard Baker called in the Chief Medical Officer to examine the cases. His finished report has not yet been published.

■ In December 2002 a new police investigation was launched, which is still going on. There are now 62 families involved.



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