

TIMES ONLINE

From The Times

November 7, 2002

Shipman-style inquiry into 50 deaths at hospital

By Michael Horsnell and Russell Jenkins

AN EXPERT in the use of the heroin-based painkiller diamorphine is to be appointed by police conducting an investigation into the deaths of more than 50 elderly patients at a community hospital. Relations allege that the drug, used by Harold Shipman to kill many of his patients, was overprescribed at the Gosport War Memorial Hospital near Portsmouth.

Detectives are preparing to interview relations of those who died at the 180-bed hospital amid claims of unlawful killing. Many patients died while receiving recuperative care under a regime in which prescriptions for morphine and other potent drugs, it is claimed, were regularly written in advance so that nurses could administer them unsupervised.

Ann Alexander, a solicitor who represented more than 300 families in the Shipman inquiry, had a two-hour meeting with Detective Chief Superintendent Steve Watts, of Hampshire police, and his deputy, Nigel Neven, yesterday.

She said: "It was a very productive meeting. They have completely reassured me about their intentions to do whatever they can to get to the bottom of whatever has been going on at this hospital."

After complaints by relations that police had failed to respond fully to initial concerns, it was disclosed that officers will look at how Greater Manchester Police organised the Shipman inquiry, notably its use of expert witnesses. Ms Alexander said: "The police want to see every single family that wishes to see them. They are hoping that anyone who has not been in touch and who has concerns should come forward."

The meeting, at her office in Altrincham, near Manchester, came after worried families contacted a helpline set up by health managers. A total of 57 people attended a public meeting held by Alexander Harris, a firm of solicitors, on Sunday to hear concerns about treatment at the hospital dating back to the early 1990s.

The firm represents relations of 27 elderly patients who died at the hospital and one who survived, but there are believed to be at least as many again whom detectives want to contact. Among the cases under investigation are those of Leonard Graham, 75, who was recovering from pneumonia. Another, Betty Rogers, 67, was recovering from a chest infection. The patient's daughter was urged to go home, having been told that she was not near death. Fifteen minutes later she received a call to say that her mother had died.

Other deaths under investigation include those of Stanley Carby, 65, Eva Page, 88, and Dulcie Middleton, 85.

The hospital has already been the subject of an investigation by the Commission for Health Improvement, which criticised its prescribing practices. Although a commission report said that it could not look at any particular death, it found that doses of up to 200 milligrams a day of morphine were being administered by pumps.

In September, the Government's Chief Medical Officer commissioned a clinical audit. Professor Richard Baker, who worked on the Shipman inquiry, was appointed to examine death rates at the hospital.

In the same month, the chief executives responsible for managing the hospital at the time of the deaths were suspended. Ian Piper, of Fareham and Gosport Primary Care Trust, and Tony Horne, of East Hampshire Primary Care Trust, were moved to other duties. The suspensions were prompted after

internal documents from 1991, before the deaths, were found which highlighted concerns about the hospital's prescribing practices.

It has sought to reassure its present patients by appointing a senior nurse from another area to review patient care.

Jane Barton, who was in charge of the day-to-day treatment of some elderly patients at the hospital until July 2000, was referred to the General Medical Council in September.

A consultant geriatrician and seven nurses are also the subject of complaints about the dead patients' treatment.

There is no suggestion that Dr Barton, who has refused to comment, or any of the other people who worked at the hospital, deliberately caused harm.

The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Health Authority said: "It is important to note that, while the (Commission for Health Improvement) investigation had some serious concerns about services in the past, it concluded that policies and procedures are now in place to ensure safe standards of care at the hospital."

Hampshire police acknowledged that a meeting between Mr Watts and Alexander Harris, representing the families of people who died at the Gosport hospital, had taken place.

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