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Saturday, 14 September, 2002, 17:27 GMT 18:27 UK

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**Inquiry into hospital deaths**

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Hampshire Police investigated the deaths in 1998

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The Chief Medical Officer for England has ordered an inquiry into at least nine suspicious deaths at a community hospital in Hampshire.

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The move, by Professor Sir Liam Donaldson, follows a highly critical report into care of older people at the Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

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Sir Liam has called in Professor Richard Baker, from the University of Leicester, to lead a clinical audit of services at the hospital.

Professor Baker, who compiled a detailed analysis of killer GP Harold Shipman's career, will investigate the trends and patterns of death at the hospital.

**Police investigation**

A police investigation was carried out between 1998 and 2001 after relatives voiced concern over the care of patients.

The daughter of one, 91-year-old Gladys Richards, claims that her mother died as a result of mistreatment.

The audit also follows the Commission for Health Improvement report which criticised Portsmouth Healthcare NHS Trust - the authority which ran the hospital until April - for excessive use of pain-relieving and sedative drugs.

In a statement released by the Department of Health, Sir Liam said: "Even though both previous investigations found no grounds for

Southampton

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serious concern, neither was in a position to establish whether trends and patterns of death were out of line with what would be expected.

"It was a wish to ensure that all necessary investigation was carried out that led to the decision to carry out this further investigation."

### **No monitoring**

The CHI report found that during 1998 there was no effective monitoring of the levels of prescription of medicines, and that some patients were prescribed strong pain relief on admission before a total assessment of their needs was made.

The report said patients were regularly put at risk - but that the inspectors could not confirm whether anyone died as a result of the treatment they received at the hospital.

The hospital, a 108-bed community hospital providing outpatient services and clinics for the elderly, has since adopted new procedures under its new management, by the Fareham and Gosport and East Hampshire Primary Care Trusts.

When the findings of the CHI report were published in July, its chief executive, Peter Homa, said: "Portsmouth Healthcare NHS Trust failed to have the appropriate systems in place in 1998 to monitor the practice of some staff at Gosport War Memorial Hospital. It failed to recognise a potential risk to patients, many of whom were frail, older people, from the levels of analgesia being prescribed.

"As a result, it did not carry out a proper review of prescribing and excessive medication wasn't questioned."

The police investigation into the deaths at the hospital was discontinued in February.

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