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Police investigate deaths of 30 elderly patients

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POLICE are investigating the hospital care of up to 30 elderly patients after relatives complained that they may have died from overdoses of powerful painkillers.

The families have hired the solicitor who represented many of the relatives in the Shipman case to put the argument for a full public inquiry into the deaths.

All of the patients who died were admitted to Gosport War Memorial Hospital in Hampshire to recuperate, and their families were told that they should make a full recovery.

The police investigations are centred on the use of painkillers, including diamorphine, and sedatives at the 108-bed hospital near Portsmouth.

Hampshire police and health officials originally opened an inquiry into a single case at the cottage hospital, but the inquiry expanded to 13 deaths between 1997 and 2000. It now goes back into the early 1990s. Police confirmed yesterday that more families had come forward after recent publicity about the investigation. The force refused to say how many, but at least 27 families have joined a campaign group.

The local health authority has received between 40 and

50 calls from worried relatives on a helpline and some have been referred to the police.

The police have already investigated the hospital and sent a report to the Crown Prosecution Service, which decided that there was insufficient evidence for any charges. Police then called in the Commission for Health Improvement, the hospital watchdog.

The commission's inspectors could not determine whether the drugs prescribed had contributed to any deaths. They criticised the use of diamorphine combined with a strong anaesthetic and another drug usually used for schizophrenia. That combination "could carry a risk of excessive sedation and respiratory depression in older patients".

Dr Liam Donaldson, the Chief Medical Officer, has asked Professor Richard Baker, who worked on the Shipman case, to carry out a study into the hospital's death rate.

Dr 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, but there is no suggestion that any of them deliberately harmed any patient.