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Shipman expert to head hospital deaths inquiry

AN expert who worked on the case of mass murderer Harold Shipman is to head an inquiry into the deaths of 13 patients at a hospital.

There are fears that some who died at Gosport Royal Memorial Hospital in Hampshire may have been killed by a drug overdose.

Files on several of the cases are being sent to the Crown Prosecution Service following a police investigation. At this stage, there is no suggestion that any of the patients was harmed deliberately.

The investigation began after families raised concerns that their relatives may have been given overdoses of drugs including diamorphine.

Professor Richard Baker has been commissioned by chief medical offi-

cer Liam Donaldson to carry out a study into the deaths. Professor

'Every aspect will be explored'

Baker, professor of clinical governance at Leicester University, analysed death rates at GP Harold Shipman's practice in Hyde, Greater Manchester. Shipman is serving life for murdering 15 patients but has been officially blamed for killing at least 200 more.

The Gosport patients who died were all admitted between 1997 and 2000 to Daedalus, Dryad or Sultan wards to recover from treatment.

The first complaint was by Gillian Mackenzie, whose mother Gladys Richards, 91, died in August 1998.

Mrs Richards received a cocktail of painkillers which should not have been used together.

Hampshire police sent a file on her death to the Crown Prosecution Ser-

By **Sinead McIntyre**

vice, which concluded that there was insufficient evidence to prosecute any member of staff. But in March 2001, 11 other families came forward to raise concerns about the deaths of their relatives.

Cases include that of Leonard Graham, 75, who was recovering from pneumonia.

His wife Dorie claims she was told to go and ring her daughter while a drug dose was administered. Her husband died shortly afterwards.

A GP who worked at the hospital has been referred to the General Medical Council's professional conduct committee while a consultant geriatrician and seven nurses are also the subject of complaints.

Professor Baker's inquiry was commissioned after a Commission for Health Improvement investigation found that the use of pain relieving and sedative drugs at the hospital had at times been excessive.

Its report criticised the use of diamorphine combined with a

strong anaesthetic and another drug usually used to treat schizophrenia.

The combination 'could carry a risk of excessive sedation and respiratory depression in older patients, leading to death', the report said.

Although the CHI said it could not look at any individual death, it found doses of up to 200 milligrams a day of morphine were being administered to patients.

Yesterday Mr Donaldson said: 'Even though both previous investigations have found no grounds for serious concern, neither was in a position to establish whether trends and patterns of death were out of line with what was to be expected.'

The Department of Health said: 'Every single aspect of the deaths will be explored.'

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Gladys Richards: Drug cocktail