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Police probe 13 hospital deaths

Lois Rogers
Medical Correspondent

POLICE are investigating the deaths of 13 elderly hospital patients who relatives believe were killed with overdoses of powerful drugs, including the painkiller diamorphine.

On Friday Liam Donaldson, the chief medical officer, ordered an audit of the hospital's death rates, which will be carried out by the same expert who analysed mortality among patients of the GP Harold Shipman.

Shipman, who was sentenced to life two years ago, is believed to have killed more than 250 elderly people by giving them overdoses of diamorphine, the pure form of heroin that is used as a painkiller but is lethal in overdose.

All 13 of the Hampshire patients were admitted to Gosport War Memorial hospital between 1997 and 2000 to recover from various operations and treatments. None of their families was told at the time of admission that their relatives were expected to die.

Jane Barton, a GP who was in day-to-day charge of medical care at the hospital until July 2000, was referred to the General Medical Council's professional conduct committee last week. A consultant geriatrician and seven nurses are also the subject of complaints about the dead patients' treatment.

However, there is no suggestion that Barton, who has refused to comment, or any of the others who worked on the wards deliberately caused harm

to any patient.

Among the cases being probed are the deaths of:

□ Elsie Devine, 88, who was admitted to the hospital to recover from a kidney infection. Her relatives were urged to leave the hospital shortly before she died. They were stunned to discover she had been given large doses of diamorphine.

□ Leonard Graham, 75, who was recovering from pneumonia. His wife was "told" to ring her daughter while a drug dose was administered. He died shortly afterwards.

□ Betty Rogers, 67, who was recovering from a chest infection. Her daughter was urged to go home having been told her mother was not near death. Fifteen minutes later she received a call saying she had died.

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

Among those who are helping the police with their inquiries is Jim Ripley, a 76-year-old gout sufferer who was admitted to Gosport War Memorial hospital in April 2000. He narrowly escaped death after falling into a painkiller-induced coma on one of the three wards now under investigation. It took five hours for an emergency doctor to arrive after he lost consciousness at hospital. He was transferred to the nearby Haslar hospital where staff soon established he had not had a stroke, as was first suspected, but was in an "analgesic coma".

A number of families were advised to take holidays during

their relatives' last hours. "Why did they tell me to go on holiday? Surely they knew he was going to die," said Dorie Graham, whose husband Leonard died in 2000. She complained to the police more than a year ago.

Edna Purnell, 91, entered the hospital for rehabilitation after a hip replacement. She was put in a darkened room and heavily sedated, according to Mike Wilson, her son. Wilson consulted a solicitor and tried to get her moved to a private hospital. He was then himself rushed into hospital after a heart attack and while he was there she died.

The medical notes of Alice Wilkie, 88, record her as having died twice on the same day. Her granddaughter Emily Yeats believes this is because her files were mixed with those of Gladys Richards, 91, who died hours later. Both received cocktails of painkillers that investigations by the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) revealed should not have been used together.

A CHI report into the hospital's practice, published in July, criticised the use of diamorphine combined with a strong anaesthetic, and another drug usually used to treat schizophrenia. This combination, the report said, "could carry a risk of excessive sedation and respiratory depression in older patients, leading to death".

The CHI was originally asked to investigate the hospital by the police, who had begun a criminal investigation into the 1998 death of Richards, after her family alleged she had been

unlawfully killed.

Although the CHI report said it could not look at any particular death, it found doses of up to 200 milligrams a day of morphine were being administered through pumps into patients' bloodstreams. Prescriptions for morphine and other potent drugs were regularly written in advance, so that nurses could administer them unsupervised.

Ian Piper, the chief executive of the Gosport and Fareham primary care trust, which now administers the hospital, said he could not comment on individual cases. The trust has just sent its first draft of proposals to meet the 22 recommendations for change in the CHI report. Standards of care at the hospital had improved, said Piper.

Families of 10 of the dead patients attended a meeting called by Ian Readhead, deputy chief constable of Hampshire, last week. Police said a file on the affair will be sent to the Crown Prosecution Service this month. The Nursing and Midwifery Council said it was investigating disciplinary proceedings against several nurses.

Donaldson has commissioned Richard Baker, professor of clinical governance at Leicester University, to repeat the statistical analysis he conducted into Shipman's practice.

Donaldson said previous inquiries into patient concerns at Gosport had not established whether patterns of death were "out of line with what would be expected". Baker will seek to answer the question fully.