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SETBACK: Police say probe into hospital deaths may go on for many more months

Extra anguish for bereaved relatives

by Nicholas Brooks
Health reporter

A POLICE investigation into dozens of deaths at the Gosport War Memorial Hospital could drag on for many more months, families have been told.

The setback for relatives came just as they were beginning to hope that the end of their ordeal could be in sight.

Currently, 61 deaths are being looked into by Hampshire police, and expectations had been growing that the families would soon be told which cases, if any, would be taken to court.

However, after a tense meeting on Thursday between more than 100 relatives of the dead and Hampshire's Deputy Chief Constable, Ian Readhead, those hopes appear to have been dashed.

Relatives were told that more investigation into the circumstances of the deaths was needed before a decision on each case was possible.

Audit professor investigated Shipman tragedies

RESEARCH looking into the numbers of deaths recorded at Gosport War Memorial Hospital is almost complete but could remain secret for months or even years.

The work was ordered by the government exactly one year ago, but the results are likely to remain under wraps until Hampshire police finish

their current probe.

The 'clinical audit' of the hospital has been carried out by Professor Richard Baker, the man who investigated the death rates among patients of notorious serial killer Dr Harold Shipman.

The Leicester University professor told *The News*: 'I cannot give a publication

date as yet, although I hope that this can be soon. Some final checks are being carried out.'

A Department of Health spokeswoman said: 'Decisions will soon be made about publication and its timing in the light of the continuing police investigation.'

One family member said: 'We have been told it might take months and months and months before they are going to be able to do anything.'

'I just can't believe it. I am so angry it is taking this long.'

Another added: 'We did not expect them to tell us which cases would go ahead when we were all there in a big group, but we thought that we would be getting letters within a few weeks.'

'It was a very traumatic evening, very upsetting for every-

body, but we know that the police have only got one chance to take this to court, so we have no choice but to wait.'

The families have hired Ann Alexander, the solicitor who represented the relatives of the victims of notorious killer Dr Harold Shipman.

Concern focuses on whether elderly patients were given inappropriate treatment, including high doses of morphine, that led to their premature deaths.

An earlier police probe

found nothing wrong but is the subject of an investigation by the Police Complaints Authority, and in July last year a Commission for Health Improvement report found serious problems with past drug prescribing at the hospital.

A police spokeswoman said: 'This is a very complex investigation, and we would anticipate it going on for some time.'

'The purpose of the meeting was to update the families on the progress of the investigation.'

Clayton puts major on behind him to help children