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HEARING: GP tells GMC her prescribing of medicines was 'potentially hazardous'

Doctor admits drug mistakes

Clare Semke
Health reporter

THE doctor at the centre of a probe into the deaths of elderly patients at Gosport War Memorial Hospital has admitted she made mistakes.

GP Jane Barton accepted that the range of drug doses that she prescribed for patients was 'too wide'.

She also accepted her actions in prescribing powerful painkillers and sedatives were 'potentially hazardous' in all but one of 12 cases being examined in the latest hearing related to the deaths, which led to three lengthy police investigations.

Dr Barton made the admissions before a General Medical Council hearing which will decide whether she is fit to practise as a GP. It is the first time she has admitted that she had made any errors.

Dr Barton is accused of serious professional misconduct in relation to her care and treatment of patients who died at the hospital in Bury Road.

The hearing is still to hear further allegations against her, including claims that the starting doses of painkiller diamorphine and sedative midazolam she prescribed were too high. She is also accused of failing to keep proper notes.

She could be banned from practising medicine if found guilty by a five-strong panel at the hearing - scheduled for 11 weeks at Regent's Place, Euston Road, London.

Dr Barton - who was clinical assistant in the now-defunct Dryad and Daedalus wards where the 12 patients died between 1996 and 1999 - yesterday admitted her actions meant excessive drug doses could



Dr Jane Barton's conduct is under scrutiny

have been administered to patients in 11 cases.

And in five of the cases the GP did not seek advice when the patients' conditions deteriorated.

Tom Kark, counsel for the General Medical Council, told the panel: 'The dose range prescribed by Dr Barton was in each case that you are going to consider far too wide and breached acceptable medical practices.'

He added: 'There was unfortunately a period of time under [Dr Barton's] management when patients were receiving sub-standard care.'

Dr Barton is already subject to seven conditions

placed on her by the General Medical Council, including a temporary ban on prescribing diamorphine.

She must also restrict her prescribing of tranquiliser diazepam in line with medical guidance.

The hearing comes after an inquest jury at Portsmouth Coroner's Court in April heard the deaths of five patients at the Gosport War Memorial Hospital were 'more than minimally' contributed to by medication.

In three cases they found painkillers administered were inappropriate for their condition or symptoms.

INVESTIGATION

■ Dr Jane Barton was the only doctor investigated in relation to the death of 92 elderly patients at Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

■ The GP, who is a partner at Forton Medical Centre in Whites Place, Gosport, was clinical assistant and in charge of the day-to-day running of now defunct Dryad and Daedalus wards at the Bury Road site until her resignation in July 2000.

■ A damning report published by the then Commission for Health Improvement in 2002 found patients were being put at risk.

■ The deaths were subject to three inquiries by Hampshire Constabulary and a probe by the Crown Prosecution Service - which decided in November 2006 that no charges would be brought.

They also ruled that the medication had been administered for therapeutic reasons in all five cases and that medication had not contributed to a further five deaths.

The panel is examining Dr Barton's conduct in relation to the care, treatment and subsequent deaths of Geoffrey Packman - known as Mick - Ruby Lake, 84, Robert Wilson, 74, Elsie Devine, 88, Leslie Pittock, 82, Elsie Lavender, 88, Arthur Cunningham, 79 - known as Brian, Enid Spurgeon, 92, Alice Wilkie, Jean Stevens, Eva Page and Gladys Richards, 91.

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Patients' notes are probed for accuracy



Gosport War Memorial Hospital

HOSPITAL patients described as 'calm and peaceful' in hospital notes were in fact in drug-induced comas, the panel heard.

Expert evidence revealed at the opening of a General Medical Council hearing into Dr Jane Barton's fitness to practise claims patients at Gosport War Memorial Hospital were given 'sub-standard care'.

In his opening statement barrister Tom Kark - lead counsel for the General Medical Council - said Professor Gary Ford, an expert drafted in to look at deaths at the hospital, believed strong painkillers and sedatives given to elderly patients caused them to become comatose.

He said: 'Many of the patients who were described in the nursing notes as calm and peaceful were, according to Professor Ford, in drug-induced comas.'

He added: 'There was, you see, a series of failings which led to patients being over-medicated and unnecessarily anaesthetised.'

'The failings included a lack of proper assessment before opiates were prescribed and an irresponsible method of prescribing opiates.'

'There was an almost universal failure by Dr Barton to make proper notes, either at assessment of the patients - if such assessment were in fact taking place - or to justify her actions in prescribing opiates. Frequently opiate medication was increased with no explanation noted.'