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Expert: Drugs could have led to Gosport death



Dr Jane Barton



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Health reporter

Drugs could have caused the death of an elderly patient at Gosport War Memorial Hospital, a panel has heard.

Expert professor Gary Ford told a General Medical Council hearing that high doses of powerful painkillers and sedatives are 'highly likely' to have contributed to Elsie Lavender's death.

Dr Jane Barton prescribed the 88-year-old diamorphine – a form of heroin – and midazolam following her admission to the Bury Road site.

Speaking on day 21 of a hearing into the GP's fitness to practice, Prof Ford said: 'One of the issues with older patients with multiple pathologies is they can die suddenly, so it's difficult to prove beyond all doubt that one cause is the cause of death. But it's highly likely that the drugs contributed to this lady's cause of death.'

Mrs Lavender was admitted to the now-defunct Daedalus ward on February 22, 1996.

Her notes state she was in pain and Prof Ford believes morphine may have been appropriate treatment.

However, he says there is no 'clear and strong justification' or assessment of the cause of her pain, which could have led to other treatments.

Mrs Lavender was initially given oral doses of morphine. Dr Barton prescribed a sedative and between 100mg and 200mg of diamorphine on March 5 to replace an earlier prescription.

Prof Ford said: 'A 100mg dose is five times higher than the equivalent of oral morphine she's taking. That is again, like the first prescription, not justified.'

She was pronounced dead at 9.28pm the following day.

Dr Barton has admitted the dose range she prescribed was too wide and could have led to Mrs Lavender being over-medicated. She also admits not seeking advice when her condition deteriorated and that her actions in prescribing were 'potentially hazardous'.

A five-strong panel is also 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, Arthur Cunningham, 79 – known as Brian – Enid Spurgeon, 92, Alice Wilkie, Jean Stevens, 73, Eva Page and Gladys Richards, 91. Dr Barton denies serious professional misconduct.

(Proceeding).

'NO JUSTIFICATION FOR GIVING PAINKILLERS'

At the GMC hearing yesterday, Prof Ford also said there was no justification for giving Gladys Richards, another patient at Gosport War Memorial Hospital, the powerful painkiller morphine.

The 91-year-old was moved there for rehabilitation following an operation on her fractured right hip at the Royal Hospital Haslar. But she had been prescribed the weaker painkiller co-codamol while a patient there and was mobile.

Mrs Richards was transferred back to Haslar three days after her admission on August 11, 1998 after dislocating her hip when she fell out of bed. She underwent further surgery and returned to Daedalus ward at Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

Prof Ford added that by this point Mrs Richards' condition had changed 'quite dramatically'.

He added: 'In a lady with dementia, this case paints a gloomy picture for the future.'

Mrs Richards was given doses of diamorphine and sedative midazolam described by the professor as 'high' but not unreasonable.

She died there on August 19.

GMC HEARING

The GMC hearing into Dr Jane Barton's fitness to practice comes after an inquest jury at Portsmouth Coroner's Court in April heard that the deaths of five patients at Gosport War Memorial Hospital were 'more than minimally' contributed to by the medication given.

In three cases they found the use of painkillers was inappropriate for their condition or symptoms.

But they ruled that the medication was administered for therapeutic reasons in all five cases and that medication had not contributed to a further five deaths.

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