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News

by GEOFF PUGH

Police look into deaths of elderly at hospital

POLICE investigating an allegation that a 91-year-old woman was unlawfully killed at a hospital are examining the circumstances surrounding the deaths of three more patients.

Relatives of three pensioners came forward after police announced their inquiry into the woman's death.

Detectives have spent two years investigating the woman's death at the National Health Service War Memorial Hospital in Gosport, Hants.

A file has been sent to the Crown Prosecution Service and if the case goes to court the files into as many as 600 deaths of elderly people could be re-opened.

It is thought the three new inquiries will involve concerns over the use of the pain-killing drug diamorphine.

Detectives have interviewed a number of medical staff at the hospital, though there have been no arrests.

One of the relatives in the fresh investigations had protested to the health service ombudsman after his mother, Edna Purnell, 91, died in December 1998.

Her son, Mike Wilson, claimed his mother had fallen into a "trance-like" state before her death.

The ombudsman examined Mr Wilson's complaint against Portsmouth Health-Care NHS Trust but cleared the hospital of any blame.

The ombudsman concluded: "I have not found evidence of unsatisfactory medical or nursing care and am satisfied Mrs Purnell was not given excessive doses of morphine."

But the report criticised the hospital for the way in which some of her medical notes were destroyed.

"The early destruction of the records was contrary to the trust's own policy and went against official guidance," it said. "The trust expressed their deep regret ... and said it was the only time such an error had been made."

Detectives will also scrutinise events surrounding the death at the hospital last September of Jack Williamson, 81, of Gosport.

His son Ian, 48, said he thought it "rather strange" that his father had died days after his mother Ivy, 76.

A widow from Fareham, Hants, has also approached police about her husband's death at the hospital.