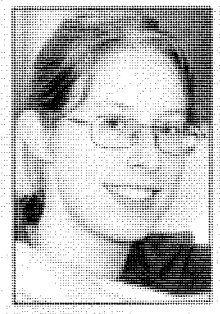
14/9/02

HEALTH: Inquiry looks into the deaths of patients whose relatives fear that their

Third inquiry



REBECCA ELLINOR reports on a further probe into the deaths of elderly patients at a Gosport hospital

THE government's chief medical officer has ordered a third probe into the deaths of elderly patients at a Gosport hospital.

It is only the second time Sir Liam Donaldson has demanded an expert investigation of this kind – the first was in the case of Dr Harold Shipman.

The same expert who scrutinised the circumstantial evidence surrounding the deaths of patients of the Greater Manchester GP will come to Gosport to quiz staff and examine medical records.

However, the Department of Health stresses that while the ordering of an inquiry of this kind is extremely rare, and while the same man – Professor Richard Baker – will conduct it, connections between the two cases ends there.

Health officials say Professor Baker has been called in as he is regarded as the UK's leading expert in this type of inquiry.

It follows continuing concerns over the deaths of elderly patients at Gosport War Memorial Hospital which have already been the subject of investigations by the police and the health watchdog the Commission for Health Improvement.

Following the publishing of the CHI report in July this year, no formal plans were made by local health chiefs to investigate the deaths again.

But the Department of Health has now stepped in to make sure no stone is left unturned.

Sir Liam said: 'Even though both previous investigations found no grounds for serious concern, neither was in a position to establish whether trends and patterns of deaths were out of line with what would be expected.'

A department spokeswoman added: 'We're aware of local concerns and those from family members of people who died at that hospital, of course we are.

'We are having this further investigation to make sure everything is done to satisfy not just ourselves but also people in the Gosport area.'

Professor Baker will draw on medical records, staff rotas, times of death, the amount of drugs given and the condition of each patient who died.

The relatives of patients who died following treatment at Gosport's War Memorial Hospital – among them Gladys Richards, Dulcie Middleton, Edna Purnell, Alice Wilkie, Elsie Devine and Stanley Carby – greeted the decision with delight and relief.

They said they had high hopes some progress would finally be made and answers given.

Gillian Mackenzie, whose mother Mrs Richards died in 1998, said: 'I am absolutely thrilled to hear about this.

'I hope the police and others will now take it just as seriously. It is a great step forward and I look forward to hearing what happens.'

Ian Piper, chief executive of the Fareham and Gosport Primary Care Trust, the health group that oversees the running of the War Memorial Hospital, said he also welcomed this third inquiry.

He said: 'I sympathise with the relatives; we want to do everything we can to find some answers for these families, staff at the hospital and community in Gosport.'

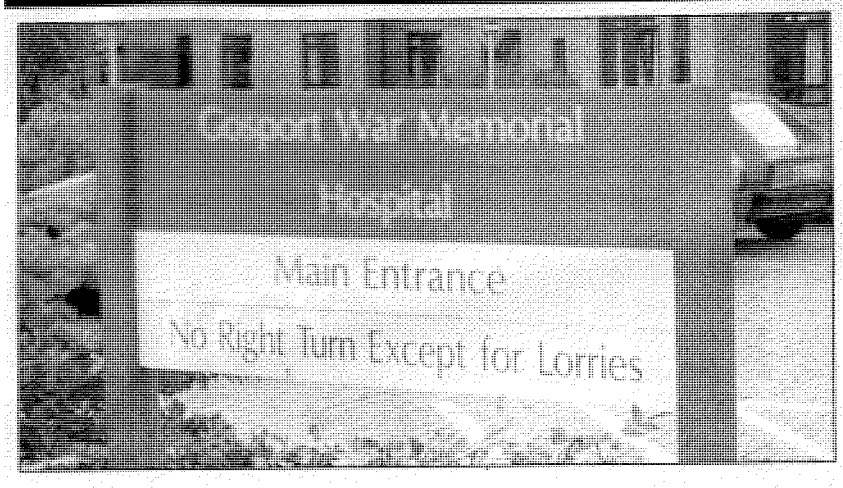
Mr Piper said he wanted to reinforce the point that many changes have already been made to staff numbers and procedures at the hospital since the deaths in 1998.

Hampshire Police Deputy Chief Constable Ian Readhead said: 'We are aware of the appointment of Professor Baker. We will fully support his work in any way we can.

'I personally met bereaved relatives for two hours on Wednesday at Fareham police station to discuss the current status of our inquiries. I have assured them that I will keep them as fully informed as I can of the progress of our work.'

Professor Baker's investigation is expected to begin within the next few weeks, once he has liaised with Hampshire police. He will submit a report of his findings to Sir Liam.

THE OFFICIAL COMPLAINTS



A POLICE inquiry was triggered by a complaint from Gillian Mackenzie, whose 91-year-old mother Gladys Richards died at the hospital in August 1998.

She died at Gosport War Memorial Hospital after being transferred from the Royal Hospital Haslar for rehabilitation following a hip operation.

When *The News* revealed the complaint 17 months ago the police had sent evidence from their investigation to crown prosecutors.

The Crown Prosecution Service scrutinised the police file but decided that there were no grounds for a prosecution.

In the meantime more relatives came forward to complain about the treatment of family members who died at the hospital.

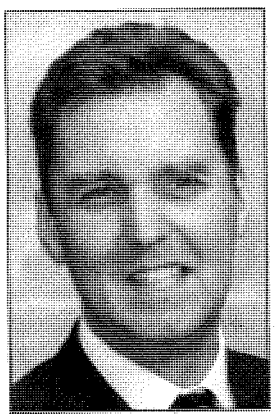
One family asked for an independent review, which was carried out by medical staff from another organisation on the south coast, others involved the ombudsman – the official NHS watchdog – but nothing substantial came from those.

This caused relatives to lodge official complaints against the police about the way they handled the investigation.

When the complaints were lodged, police held an internal inquiry into how officers had handled the case. A report was compiled by Chief Superintendent Dan Clacher.

Now his report, the report compiled by the Commission for Health Improvement plus reports into four other deaths at the hospital are to be sent to the Crown Prosecution Service.

In the meantime relatives had also complained to the General Medical Council and the Nursing and Midwifery Council about the conduct of staff.



Alan Milburn

Families welcome department's statement

FAMILIES who have been fighting for answers about their relatives' deaths at the Gosport War Memorial Hospital welcomed the announcement by the Department of Health.

Gillian Mackenzie, whose mother Gladys Richards died in 1998, said that she hoped it would make other organisations take notice.

She said: 'I am absolutely thrilled to hear about this. It means the department of health is taking these cases seriously.

'It is a great step forward and I look forward to hearing what happens.'

Emily Yeats, whose grandmother Alice Wilkie died at the hospital, was also pleased.

She said: 'If this is the case then it is very welcome. I hope that the police will also look at any report. I also hope that it will make other people as high up as Alan Milburn, the Secretary of State for Health, take notice.'

Marjorie Bulbeck, whose mother Dulcie Middleton died, said: 'We have all written to the General Medical Council and we have all written to ministers and at last something seems to be being done.'

14/9/02

Treatment at Gosport War Memorial Hospital was not all it should have been

into OAPs' deaths

Gosport War Memorial hospital, where the deaths of some elderly patients are to be investigated again

THE EXPERT

PROFESSOR Richard Baker is a member of the Clinical Governance and Research Development Unit based at the University of Leicester.

He has been called in to carry out a clinical audit which will look at any trends and patterns in the deaths of former Gosport War Memorial Hospital patients.

He has only been called upon by the government's health department once before; in the case of Dr Harold Shipman, following his conviction.

Professor Baker was called in because he is the country's leading authority

Professor Richard Baker

on this type of audit which will include an examination of issues including medical records, staff rotas, times of death and drugs doses.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Health said: 'We've chosen Professor Baker to carry out this audit because he is the premier national expert.

'We are aware his involvement will raise queries but it was important we had the best.

'It's important to keep an open mind about the outcome of this investigation,' she added.

While Professor Baker has no formal powers, the health spokeswoman said it would be 'unthinkable' for anyone to refuse to help him with his investigation.

The health spokeswoman added: 'It's a priority that we ensure a thorough and rigorous methodology is used for this sort of thing. Every single aspect of the deaths will be explored.'

In the case of Shipman, who was convicted of the murder of 15 patients, Professor Baker discovered the GP had probably killed 236 of his patients and may have killed more than 300.

Raw statistics suggested that at the extreme there were 345 extra deaths when Shipman's records were compared with normal practice at similar surgeries.

However, a more detailed analysis of the circumstances surrounding each death showed a probable figure to be 236, because these were patients who died at home.

Factors such as the time of death and whether relatives of Shipman himself were present were taken into account.

Many of Shipman's patients also appeared to have died in the afternoon, which is considered unusual.

Professor Baker presented the government's chief medical officer with the circumstantial evidence he found and highlighted any cases where he thought there was reason for concern.

Watchdog was asked to see how elderly patients were treated

HEALTH watchdog the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) was called in last year to scrutinise the way elderly people were treated at Gosport's War Memorial Hospital.

It was particularly asked to look at arrangements for the administering of drugs, responsibility of patient care and the transfer of patients between the War Memorial and other hospitals.

The inquiry at the Gosport community hospital was only the seventh special investigation CHI had been involved with.

The CHI found:

- Serious concerns regarding prescribing of medicines to older people.
- Not possible to say whether high dosages of drugs led to any deaths.
- Welcomed introduction of new policies governing drugs.
- No significant concerns about the standard of nursing care now.
- Health bosses should have responded quicker to concerns over sedation levels.
- Complaints led to changes like improved levels of staffing and better communication with relatives.

Main conclusions of the CHI study were that there were:

- Insufficient guidelines on the prescribing of powerful drugs.
- A lack of checking of data led to high-dosage prescribing going unchallenged.
- Poor prescribing practice not noticed.
- A lack of thorough assessments of patients' needs on admission.

Many changes have been made to procedures at the hospital since the time of the deaths in 1998.

The CHI praised the changes but asked the hospital to make further improvements reviewing its guidelines on drug prescribing, how it handles complaints, staff training and leadership.

A draft action plan was sent to the CHI by Gosport health bosses this week.