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# Morphine overdoses blamed for hospital patients' deaths

► Inquest vindication for relatives who had said painkiller was overused

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AN INQUEST into the deaths of 10 elderly patients at a hospital in Portsmouth has concluded that three of them were wrongly prescribed excessive doses of morphine which hastened their end.

Two other patients were also prescribed drugs which contributed to their deaths but the prescribing was appropriate for their condition, a jury

found yesterday. The deaths of five other patients were not caused by the drugs they were taking, it said.

Yesterday's verdicts follow a decade-long series of inquiries by police and the NHS into almost 100 deaths at Gosport War Memorial Hospital in the late 1990s. Relatives of those who died had long claimed that morphine had

been overprescribed. In a statement yesterday, they said the jury's ruling showed high doses of the powerful painkiller had been given "without justification or logic" and they awaited the response of the General Medical Council.

Complaints about the hospital date back a decade with families speaking of the "death ward" where patients sent to recuperate had died. Hampshire Police investigated but no action was taken. They alerted the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI), the NHS watchdog (now the Care Quality Commission), which concluded in 2002 that there had been a failure in patient care, with poor prescribing and supervision of staff, but that conditions had since improved.

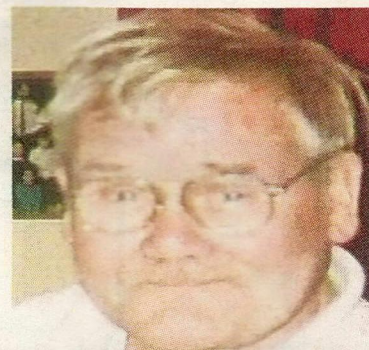
After the report was published, more families came forward and a further police investigation led to 10 sample cases being referred to the Crown Prosecution Service but it decided there was not enough evidence to prosecute. The cases were passed to the Portsmouth coroner who had to request special permission to hold inquests into the deaths from the Justice Secretary, Jack Straw, because seven of the 10 had been cremated.

Sir Liam Donaldson, the Government's Chief Medical Officer, ordered a review into death rates at the hospital in 2002 by Professor Richard Baker, the expert who exposed the statistical pattern in the Shipman murders, but the results were not made public.

The jury in the month-long inquest, which concluded yesterday, found that three of the patients - Robert Wilson, Elsie Devine and Geoffrey Packman - were prescribed medication that was not appropriate for their condition. However it was given for therapeutic reasons, implying that the overdose was not deliberate.

Professor Baker, who examined the case of Mr Wilson, 74, told the inquest that the patient might have left hospital alive if he had not been put on morphine.

Geoffrey Packman, 66, was being treated for a heart condition but staff failed to spot he was also suffering from



From top: Robert Wilson, Elsie Devine and Geoffrey Packman were prescribed inappropriate medication

internal bleeding. Professor Andrew Wilcock an expert in palliative care, told the inquest he was given "excessive amounts" of morphine.

Two other patients - Elsie Lavender, 83, and Arthur Cunningham, 79 - were treated appropriately, the jury found.

Dr Jane Barton, a GP who worked at the community hospital part time, was the only member of staff investigated in relation to the deaths, although she never faced any charges.

The inquest heard that she introduced a system of pre-emptive prescribing which allowed nurses to increase the amount of painkillers such as morphine without the need for a doctor being present.