

HEARING: Ex-War Memorial Hospital nurse testifies

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# Unrousable patients 'the norm' after painkillers

by Clare Semke  
Health reporter

IT WAS 'normal' for elderly patients to lose consciousness after being given powerful painkillers at a hospital, a panel has heard.

Former nurse Margaret Couchman told a General Medical Council hearing patients would often become unrousable when dosed with diamorphine – a form of heroin – and sedatives at Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

Ms Couchman, who worked on the now defunct Daedalus ward, said she would always give the lowest dose pre-prescribed by former clinical assistant Dr Jane Barton.

Dr Barton's fitness to practise is being assessed by a five-strong panel from the GMC after the death of 12 patients at the hospital in the late 1990s.

She has already admitted that dose ranges she prescribed to some patients on Dryad and Daedalus wards were too high, potentially hazardous and could have led to them being over-medicated.

However, Ms Couchman said she never questioned Dr Barton's actions in more than 10 years of working with her.

She told the hearing at Regent's Place, Euston Road, London: 'If the patient can't tell you exactly how much pain they are in the safest method was to give them the lowest dose and then assess the patient to see if that's correct.'

'I didn't question her on any doses. I don't think any of us did. It just didn't arise and – at the time – it was just the dose that was given.'

Ms Couchman said she could not remember 88-year-old Elsie Lavender, whom she treated after her transfer to Daedalus ward on February 22, 1996.

A note on Mrs Lavender's drug chart said she had become 'unrousable' after being given a syringe driver – an automatic pump used to deliver drugs – containing high doses of the painkiller diamorphine and sedative midazolam. But Ms Couchman said this response was 'just normal'.

Mrs Lavender died on March 6, 1996.

Dr Barton's conduct is being examined in relation to Mrs



Former Gosport War Memorial Hospital clinical assistant Dr Jane Barton is having her fitness to practise determined by the General Medical Council

PICTURE: MALCOLM WELLS (090966-9261)

## MEDICATION 'CONTRIBUTED TO DEATHS'

■ The General Medical Council hearing into Dr Jane Barton's fitness to practise comes after an inquest jury at Portsmouth Coroner's Court in April heard that the deaths of five patients at the 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.

■ Dr Barton is already subject to seven conditions placed on her by the General Medical Council, including a temporary ban on prescribing the painkiller diamorphine.

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

Lavender's death and those of Geoffrey Packman, 66 – 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, 81; Jean Stevens; Eva

Page and Gladys Richards, 91.

All of the deaths occurred between 1996 and 1999.

Dr Barton denies serious professional misconduct.

(Proceeding.)

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