

Nurses who blew whistle on drugs 'driven out of jobs'

Staff warned managers over use of potentially lethal painkillers on elderly patients back in 1991, GMC hears

By Nina Lakhani and Tim Persinko

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Nurses who voiced concerns about the widespread use of potentially lethal drugs on elderly patients at Gosport War Memorial Hospital were harassed, labelled "troublemakers" and driven out of their jobs, the General Medical Council was told last week.

Several nurses warned senior managers at the Hampshire hospital as far back as 1991 that patients were being started on powerful painkillers before they showed any signs of pain, the Council's five-person Fitness to Practice Panel was told.

The panel is inquiring into allegations of professional misconduct against Dr Jane Barton in relation to the treatment and death of 12 elderly patients in the 1990s. The hearing follows three Hampshire police investigations into 92 deaths at the hospital which resulted in no charges being brought. However, The Independent on Sunday understands that the Crown Prosecution Service is reviewing some of the cases that it closed in 2006.

The hearing was told that elderly patients were started on unacceptably high doses of the drugs by the doctor, and that the doses were then increased too quickly by nurses, without proper assessment of their pain.

Several nurses raised concerns in their evidence about Gill Hamblin, the sister on Dryad Ward, who was described as having a "very close working relationship with Dr Barton". Sister Hamblin is excused from appearing as a witness on health grounds.

Worrying inconsistencies about what went on in Gosport emerged from the six nurses who have so far given evidence in person. Lynn

Barrett, a nurse on Dryad Ward, said patients were sometimes given diamorphine to control aggression, which Shirley Hallman, a senior nurse on the ward, denied.

Ms Barrett was warned by the panel's legal adviser that she could be incriminating herself as she answered questions about whether the cocktail of drugs given to one patient, Mrs Eva Page, may have "hastened her death or killed her". Ms Barrett had started by saying that no patients had been overdosed at Gosport and that Dr Barton was being made a scapegoat.

No nurses have so far faced disciplinary action by the Nursing & Midwifery Council, despite complaints dating back to 2002. Its decision to wait until after the GMC hearing before taking action was last night described as "bewildering".

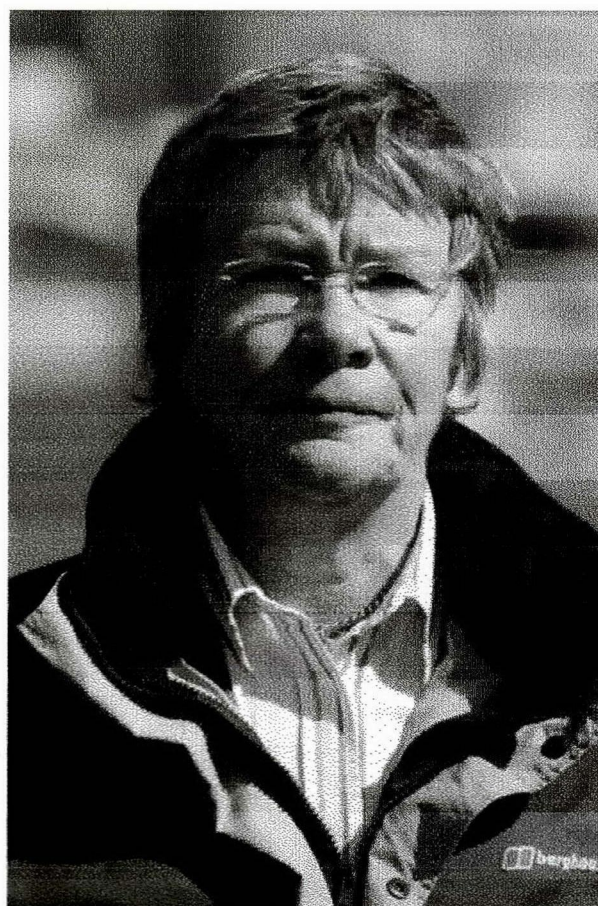
In 1991, staff nurse Beverly Turnbull raised concerns about the "indiscriminate" use of morphine, which she believed was "hastening deaths".

Ms Turnbull told the hearing: "We were labelled troublemakers by some of the staff... We were just banging our heads against a brick wall."

Nurse Hallman told the hearing Dr Barton and Sister Hamblin mounted a harassment campaign against her after she raised concerns about premature use of syringe drivers, used to deliver drugs through the skin when patients cannot swallow. She could not recall one patient who recovered after being put on a syringe driver. "Dr Barton told me she wasn't upset at me but that I didn't understand what they did here."

The NHS Trust admits "insufficient action" was taken in the 1990s but says all the issues have now been addressed.

Dr Barton is yet to give evidence at the hearing, which is expected to last until August.



PA

Dr Jane Barton: the GMC is looking into allegations of professional misconduct