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Dr Jane Barton was found guilty of acting 'not in the best interests' of elderly patients at the Gosport War Memorial Hospital

Calls for inquiry as GMC 'runs out of time' in GP probe

Relatives of 12 elderly patients who died in a Hampshire hospital are left waiting for answers

By Nina Lakhani

The General Medical Council faced growing condemnation last night after relatives of 12 elderly patients who died at a Hampshire hospital more than 10 years ago were told that they must wait until next year to find out whether the doctor in question will be struck off.

Dr Jane Barton was last week found guilty of widely prescribing powerful painkillers and sedatives to elderly patients under her care at Gosport War Memorial Hospital which were "inappropriate, hazardous and not in their best interests".

Relatives were aghast to discover that the Fitness to Practice panel had "run out of scheduled time" and would not decide whether or not Dr Barton is guilty of professional misconduct until January next year.

Dr Barton was first referred to the GMC by Hampshire Police in 2000, but no action was taken until last year when she was banned from prescribing morphine and diazepam.

Last Thursday, the doctor was condemned for routinely prescribing medication outside the recommended safe limits and failing to consider the potentially lethal consequences of this for her elderly patients.

The panel said there was no excuse for her poor note-keeping, which had hampered its ability to judge beyond reasonable doubt whether her assessments of patients were unsafe. Nor was the inadequate supervision she received an excuse because "as a medical practitioner you retained ultimate responsibility for your own actions".

Norman Lamb, the Liberal Democrat health spokesman, said: "It is intolerable that the relatives now have to wait till January for justice. The GMC has to see what it can move in order to complete the process as soon as possible. These findings reinforce the need for a public inquiry. It is scandalous that this doctor was allowed to keep practising for so many years."

A public inquiry could identify exactly how many people died under Dr Barton's care, and who knew what and

when. Hampshire Police supposedly looked into 92 deaths at the hospital but the IoS has learnt that some of those relatives have never been interviewed. The Nursing and Midwifery Council has failed to investigate nurses who worked alongside Dr Barton, despite receiving complaints in 2000.

Catherine Hopkins, the legal director of the patient safety charity Action against Medical Accidents, said: "It has now been established by the GMC and the inquest that she prescribed large doses of drugs, stepped back and left someone else to give it to patients in an NHS hospital. If this is not a suitable subject for a public inquiry then I don't know what is."

'It is scandalous this doctor was allowed to keep practising'

NORMAN LAMB
Lib Dem health spokesman

An inquest into the death of Gladys Richards, 91, which triggered police inquiries in 1998, is still to be heard. Her daughter, Gillian Mackenzie, 75, wants the coroner to see the GMC transcripts to get the whole truth. This delay means the inquest is unlikely to be heard until next spring, 12 years after she first went to the police.

The GMC will not comment on individual cases but said the panel had taken longer than expected to examine the complex evidence. The Department of Health has repeatedly brushed aside calls for a public inquiry despite pleas from relatives and the Hampshire coroner.

Vicky Packman's father, Stan Packman, 67, died after Dr Barton prescribed him a cocktail of drugs instead of investigating an internal bleed. She said: "Dad didn't stand a chance. But it's disgusting that we'll have to go through another Christmas with this all hanging over our heads."