

GP may face new probe on deaths

By Jo Macfarlane

A DOCTOR previously cleared of murdering three patients could face fresh charges after confessing to hastening the deaths of two people in his care without their consent.

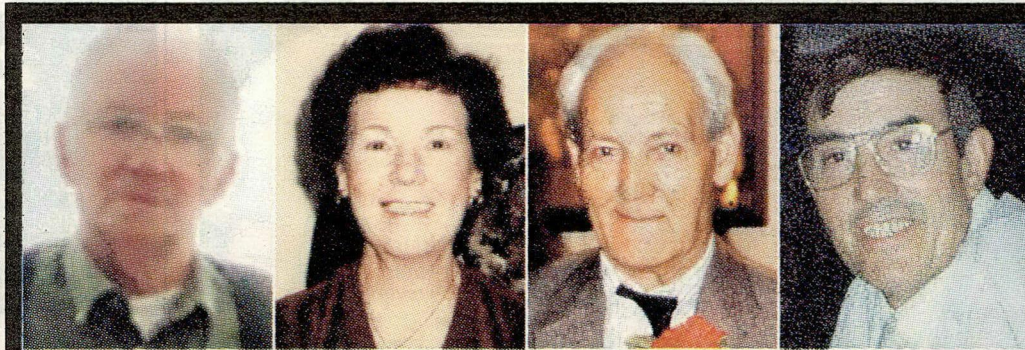
Former GP Howard Martin has admitted he may have brought forward the deaths of dozens of seriously ill patients – including his 31-year-old son Paul – by giving them massive doses of strong painkilling drugs.

He was acquitted of killing three patients in 2004 but yesterday confessed to giving two people lethal doses of morphine without their knowledge, prompting families of his alleged victims to call for him to face new charges.

It has not been made clear which patients were given the injections without their consent.

Police are set to make a decision in conjunction with the Crown Prosecution Service over whether to launch a full investigation.

His confession came after the General Medical Council last week struck him off the medical register for his 'deliberate course of conduct' towards 18 mainly vulnerable, elderly patients. The hearing concerned the deaths of the patients between 1994 and 2004. Dr Martin



PATIENTS WHO DIED: Harry Gittins, 74, Bessie Cubitt, Stanley Weldon, 74, and Frank Moss, 59

claimed he was motivated by Christian compassion and sought only to limit their suffering.

However, if he is found to have deliberately ended their lives prematurely without their consent then he could stand trial for his actions.

Five years ago a court cleared him of murdering three patients but because the double jeopardy rules have now been scrapped he could face prosecution again.

The son of Harry Gittins, one of the patients who died soon after Dr Martin administered diamorphine, said he hoped police would reopen the investigation into his

father's death. Mr Gittins, 74, had been discharged from hospital after treatment for oesophageal cancer but Dr Martin injected him with the drugs after claiming the hospital had told him the cancer had spread throughout Mr Gittins's body.

Paul Gittins, 49, from Newton Aycliffe, County Durham, said there was no possibility his father had asked the GP to end his life. 'My dad had no intention of wanting to die, definitely not.'

Kevin Weldon, 56, whose father Stanley, 74, died after being treated by Dr Martin, said: 'The police now

have his confession and they should reopen this case.'

However, others called Dr Martin an 'angel of mercy'. Albert Cubitt, 88, said his wife Bessie, who died in January 2001 after battling lung cancer, was 'grateful' for Dr Martin's intervention. Mr Cubitt added: 'He didn't ask her, she asked him. Why the hell don't they [the police] drop it?'

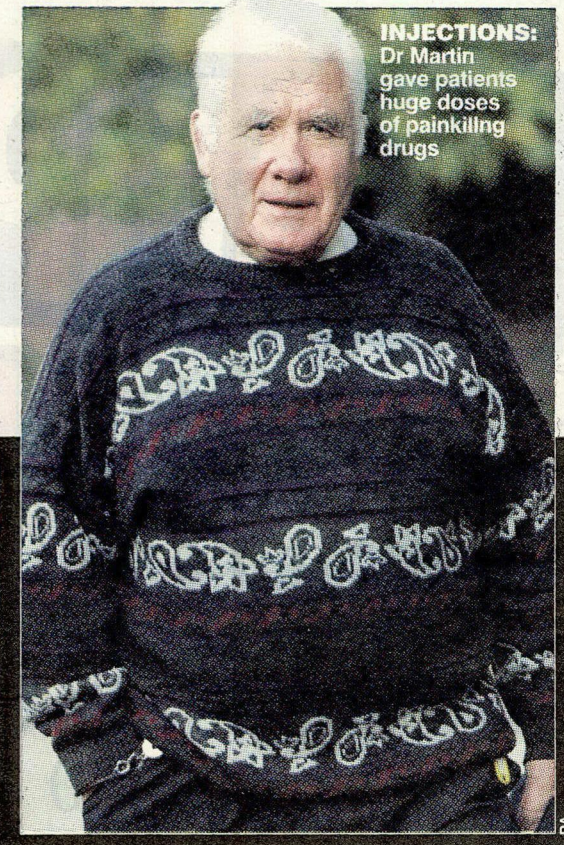
Dr Martin was arrested in 2004 at his practice in Newton Aycliffe and was charged with murdering Mr Gittins, Mr Weldon and Frank Moss, 59, whose bodies were exhumed. However, he was acquitted in 2005.

GMC guidance says doctors 'should

not strive to prolong the dying process', but there is a fine line between following this guidance and actively hastening a patient's death. However, the most important factor is obtaining consent from patients.

The GMC panel examined 18 deaths. The hearing was told that while some patients may have had only days or hours to live, in many cases Dr Martin's treatment was 'completely unacceptable ... with a real possibility of hastening the death of several'.

Dr Martin admitted one of those he had given a final injection to was his son Paul, who had cancer before his death in May 1988.



INJECTIONS: Dr Martin gave patients huge doses of painkilling drugs