Inquiry launched into 'suspicious deaths' at hospital

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The government yesterday launched a special inquiry into the suspicious deaths of elderly people at a cottage hospital in Gosport, near Portsmouth, after relatives complained that there may have been at least nine unlawful killings.

Sir Liam Donaldson, the chief medical officer, has called in Richard Baker, a professor at Leicester University, to conduct a clinical audit of services for older people at the Gosport War Memorial hospital.

Prof Baker was the expert appointed by the Department of Health to investigate the practice of Dr Howard Shipman after his conviction as a serial killer. His finding that Shipman might have been responsible for 330 deaths persuaded ministers to expand a public inquiry into his crimes.

Officials were last night unaware of the government launching any similar clinical audit before a prosecution and conviction.

Police investigated the hospital between 1998 and 2001 after concern among relatives about the death of an elderly woman who was prescribed diamorphine. This led to allegations about the deaths of eight other patients.

Hampshire police sent papers to the crown prosecution service, which decided there was not sufficient evidence on which to base a prosecution, according to a Department of Health spokeswoman.

The commission for health improvement (CHI), the government's hospital inspectorate, said: "The police were sufficiently concerned about the care of older people at the hospital to share their concerns with us."

The CHI found there was systematic failure to provide good quality care, including insufficient guidelines on prescribing painkillers and sedatives, inadequate review of prescribing for older people and lack of supervision.

In a report in July it said: "CHI has serious concerns regarding the quantity, combination, lack of review and anticipatory prescribing of medicines prescribed to older people on Dryad

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and Daedalus wards in 1998."

The inspectors were "unable to determine whether these levels of prescribing contributed to the deaths of any patients". But it was clear that this level of prescribing would have been questioned if adequate checking mechanisms had been in place.

"Relatives speaking to CHI had some serious concerns about the care their relatives received on Daedalus and Dryad wards between 1998 and 2001."

However, the inspectors said they had no serious concerns about current standards.

Sir Liam's decision to mount an investigation was based on uneasiness that neither the police nor the inspection team "was in a position to establish whether trends and patterns of death were out of line with what would be expected". Inquiries of this kind are extremely unusual, officials said.

The original investigation was sparked when Gillian Mackenzie of Code A contacted police about the death of her 91-year-old mother in 1998.

She said at the time: "I am a realistic woman. I knew there was a chance of my mother dying when she was admitted to hospital. It is the manner she died that shocked me.

"I will never know what would have happened if she had not been prescribed diamorphine, but we must ensure that all the circumstances of these deaths are fully explained."

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