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There seems to be a pattern
in the way the Police
handle these cases.

GP acquitted of murder faces inquest into patient deaths

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A GP said to have administered "grossly inappropriate" doses of opiate drugs, causing the deaths of up to 30 patients, faces further proceedings after the high court ruled yesterday that there would be an inquest into some of the deaths.

Alison Moss, whose father Frank Moss died in 2003 after Dr Howard Martin injected him with fatal doses of drugs, including morphine and prescription heroin, yesterday won her attempt to reopen the inquest.

Martin, an NHS GP under the Country Durham primary care trust, was acquitted of murdering three patients after a six-week trial at Teesside crown court in 2005. Yet he "had allowed his prescribing practices to become crude and out-of-date and was too stubborn or conservative to be prepared to modify them", Mr Justice Underhill said yesterday. "His incompetence had, of course, very grave consequences."

Quashing the decision of a coroner not to resume the inquest, the judge said the case pointed to serious failings in the role of the NHS. "[The evidence] raises a real question as to whether the relevant authorities took sufficient steps to investigate repeated reports of inadequacies in Dr Martin's practice," he said.

Moss's lawyers told the court that concerns had been expressed since at least 2000 about the circumstances of Martin's

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The number of deaths among patients of Dr Howard Martin that the General Medical Council is investigating

practice prescribing morphine to very ill patients. Dr Edwin Pugh, a hospice director, had alerted the health authority in 2000, which reported the information to the police and held meetings with Martin regarding his "outdated" practices in managing pain relief in terminally ill patients.

Three other doctors at Martin's medical practice said that they had expressed concerns about "the routine repeat prescribing of opiates" and the lack of steps taken to tackle the issue.

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Dr John Grenville, an expert in general medical practice, who gave evidence at Martin's criminal trial, said that the doses the GP had prescribed were unwarranted. "Any competent GP should have appreciated that the dosages given were likely to lead to the patient's death," Grenville had told Teesside crown court.

Martin remains suspended from practice, with the General Medical Council conducting inquiries into the deaths of 19 of his patients, the court heard. He is likely to face disciplinary proceedings in May.

A large number of cases involving the doctor were also being investigated by the police, the court heard. The coroner had ruled that there was no need to resume the inquest into the deaths because of the other investigations taking place, and in light of the fact that Martin had been acquitted of murder.

This decision was wrong, the court said yesterday, ruling that Moss "is entitled ... to an investigation of any specific failures which formed a sufficiently direct part of the circumstances into her father's