

Peter Walsh

From: Code A
Sent: 10 March 2009 09:04
To: Peter Walsh
Subject: Re: (no subject)

Peter:

Here it is. I think you can probably access it yourself on line. It is in the current issue of the journal on the front page of news. There are also some rapid responses which you might want to read. I'm pretty sure the current issue is freely available online.

Clare

Inquest begins into deaths after concerns about diamorphine prescribing

Clare Dyer

¹ BMJ

An inquest will begin this month into the deaths of 10 elderly patients at a community hospital in Hampshire in the late 1990s, amid concerns over levels of prescribing of diamorphine and other drugs.

The 10, who died between 1996 and 1999, were among 92 who died after they were given large doses of drugs at Gosport War Memorial Hospital. The inquest, which opens on 18 March and is expected to last six weeks, was ordered by the justice secretary, Jack Straw.

Police investigations carried out between 1998 and 2002 were initially sparked by a complaint from a patient's relative, who accused staff of unlawful killing. The Crown Prosecution Service decided not to prosecute, but the police passed on to the Commission for Healthcare Improvement (CHI), now the Healthcare Commission, reports from medical experts that raised serious concerns about prescribing practice.

The experts found that there was "inappropriate combined subcutaneous administration of diamorphine, midazolam and haloperidol, which could carry a risk of excessive sedation and respiratory depression in older patients, leading to death," the report of the commission's investigation says.

The experts also said that there were no clear guidelines to prevent staff making assumptions that patients had been admitted for palliative rather than rehabilitative care. A protocol for palliative care "was inappropriately applied to patients admitted for rehabilitation."

The commission agreed with the experts' "serious concerns about the levels of use of these three medicines and the apparent practice of anticipatory prescribing." It believed that the use and combination of drugs was "excessive and outside normal practice."

Local GPs worked as clinical assistants at the hospital, but the commission's report said that no systems were in place to monitor and appraise their performance at the time of the deaths.

A Gosport GP, Jane Barton, faces a fitness to practice hearing by the General Medical Council after the inquest concludes. In July 2008 the GMC banned her from prescribing diamorphine and ordered her to restrict her prescribing of diazepam in line with guidance in the *British National Formulary*.

The charity Action against Medical Accidents is supporting families of the patients whose deaths are being examined by the inquest. A solicitor and a barrister are giving their services largely free of charge.

The charity's chief executive, Peter Walsh, said, "Although there is no suggestion that the hospital is not safe today, there are still unanswered questions and potential lessons regarding the care of the elderly and the use of powerful drugs. This is possibly the last chance for families to really get to the bottom of this scandal and be able to put the matter to rest."

The charity has made a freedom of information request to the government asking it to release a 2002 report by Richard Baker, professor of clinical governance at Leicester University, about the deaths. Commissioned by Liam Donaldson, the chief medical officer for England, it has never been published.

A spokesman for NHS Hampshire said, "The local NHS has been working closely with Her Majesty's Coroner over the last few months to ensure that all the relevant information is available to support the coroner's investigation."

"Procedures at Gosport War Memorial Hospital were revised as a result of the earlier inquiries. We are very confident that the hospital provides safe, high quality care to all its patients."

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