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# Fifty families complain of hospital in death inquiry

A HOSPITAL at the centre of an inquiry into its high death rate has attracted complaints from up to 50 families who contacted a helpline, it was disclosed yesterday.

Gosport War Memorial hospital, Hampshire, is the subject of a Department of Health investigation into allegations that the painkiller morphine was inappropriately used on elderly patients, after complaints were made by 13 families.

Solicitors for the families said more people had come forward after health managers set up the helpline and appealed for information through local newspapers. A total of 27 families attended a meeting on Sunday night.

In a statement, the solicitors Alexander Harris said the families wanted a proper investigation and inquiry into events at the hospital.

It said: "All but one of those present [at the meeting] had lost a loved one taken unex-

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pectedly and suddenly ill while undergoing rehabilitation or other treatment in one of three wards at the hospital.

"Many of these had died after being given diamorphine for relief of alleged pain. A number of those who died were only a short time earlier on the road to recovery and expected to be soon well enough to be discharged home.

"Numerous relatives had subsequently made complaints to police, the General Medical Council, Nursing & Midwifery Council, Hospital Trust and Health Authority."

The inquiry was ordered by Sir Liam Donaldson, the Government's chief medical officer, in September to establish whether "patterns of death were out of line with what would be expected". It followed complaints from families of patients admitted between

1997 and 2000. The inquiry is being carried out by Richard Baker, professor of clinical governance at Leicester University, who conducted the audit of GP Harold Shipman's records which revealed him as a serial killer.

The hospital has already been the subject of an investigation by the Commission for Health Improvement, the Government's health watchdog. It found that the use of pain relieving and sedative drugs had at times been excessive.

It said the use of diamorphine combined with a strong anaesthetic and another drug usually used to treat schizophrenia "could carry a risk of excessive sedation and respiratory depression in older patients, leading to death".

However, the investigation was unable to say whether the death rate at the hospital was excessive.

The police also conducted an inquiry after receiving a complaint from Gillian Mackenzie, whose mother, Gladys, died aged

91 in 1998. Mrs Richards received a cocktail of painkillers which should not have been used together.

Hampshire police sent a file on the case to the Crown Prosecution Service, which decided not to prosecute because of a lack of evidence. But a dozen other families came forward in March 2001 with concerns about the deaths of their relatives.

In announcing the health department inquiry in September, Professor Donaldson said: "Even though both previous investigations have found no grounds for serious concern, neither was in a position to establish whether trends and patterns of deaths were out of line with what was to be expected."

Yesterday a spokesman for Hampshire and Isle of Wight Strategic Health Authority confirmed "between 40 and 50 people" had contacted the helpline with a range of concerns. Several of those people had contacted police with allegations over patient care.