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## Families prompt hospital deaths inquiry

By Helen Daniel

FAMILIES are hoping to uncover the truth about the deaths of elderly relatives at a hospital after the Government ordered an investigation.

Sir Liam Donaldson, the Chief Medical Officer, has ordered the inquiry into death rates at Gosport War Memorial Hospital in Hampshire.

It is only the second time that he has ordered such an investigation: the first was in the case of Harold Shipman, the doctor who killed hundreds of his patients.

Sir Liam said an audit of medical records and interviews with staff would be carried out to establish whether "patterns of death were out of line with what would be expected". Hampshire police are investigating whether any criminal intent was involved.

Complaints have been received from up to 13 families of patients who were admitted between 1997 and 2000. They fear mistreatment or overdoses of powerful painkillers may have been involved.

"There has to have been something wrong for this many people to complain," said Marjorie Bulbeck of

Emsworth, Hampshire, whose mother Dulcie Middleton, 85, died in September 2001.

She said: "I am pleased this has been set up because we have been struggling for this. We have got elderly people who are frightened to go into hospital."

An audit of hospital records will be carried out by Richard Baker, a professor of clinical governance at Leicester University. He conducted an analysis of Shipman's career which led to the public inquiry.

In July, government inspectors criticised the Portsmouth Healthcare NHS Trust, the authority that ran the hospital until April, for excessive use of pain-relieving drugs.

Patients were put at risk but inspectors would not say whether anyone had died as a result of their treatment.

The inspectors' report was triggered by allegations from the family of Gladys Richards, 91, that she was unlawfully killed in August 1998.

Professor Baker will draw on medical records, staff rotas, times of death, the amount of drugs given and condition of each patient who died to establish if there are any links.

Ian Piper, chief executive of the Fareham and Gosport Primary Care Trust, the health group that oversees the running of the hospital, said: "I sympathise with the relatives. We want to do everything we can to find some answers for these families."

Many changes had been made to procedures at the hospital since 1998, he said.

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# Police probe 13 hospital deaths

**Lois Rogers**  
Medical Correspondent

POLICE are investigating the deaths of 13 elderly hospital patients who relatives believe were killed with overdoses of powerful drugs, including the painkiller diamorphine.

On Friday Liam Donaldson, the chief medical officer, ordered an audit of the hospital's death rates, which will be carried out by the same expert who analysed mortality among patients of the GP Harold Shipman.

Shipman, who was sentenced to life two years ago, is believed to have killed more than 250 elderly people by giving them overdoses of diamorphine, the pure form of heroin that is used as a painkiller but is lethal in overdose.

All 13 of the Hampshire patients were admitted to Gosport War Memorial hospital between 1997 and 2000 to recover from various operations and treatments. None of their families was told at the time of admission that their relatives were expected to die.

Jane Barton, a GP who was in day-to-day charge of medical care at the hospital until July 2000, was referred to the General Medical Council's professional conduct committee last week. A consultant geriatrician and seven nurses are also the subject of complaints about the dead patients' treatment.

However, there is no suggestion that Barton, who has refused to comment, or any of the others who worked on the wards deliberately caused harm

to any patient.

Among the cases being probed are the deaths of:

□ Elsie Devine, 88, who was admitted to the hospital to recover from a kidney infection. Her relatives were urged to leave the hospital shortly before she died. They were stunned to discover she had been given large doses of diamorphine.

□ Leonard Graham, 75, who was recovering from pneumonia. His wife was "told" to ring her daughter while a drug dose was administered. He died shortly afterwards.

□ Betty Rogers, 67, who was recovering from a chest infection. Her daughter was urged to go home having been told her mother was not near death. Fifteen minutes later she received a call saying she had died.

Other deaths under investigation include Stanley Carby, 65, Eva Page, 88, and Dulcie Middleton, 85.

Among those who are helping the police with their inquiries is Jim Ripley, a 76-year-old gout sufferer who was admitted to Gosport War Memorial hospital in April 2000. He narrowly escaped death after falling into a painkiller-induced coma on one of the three wards now under investigation. It took five hours for an emergency doctor to arrive after he lost consciousness at hospital. He was transferred to the nearby Haslar hospital where staff soon established he had not had a stroke, as was first suspected, but was in an "analgesic coma".

A number of families were advised to take holidays during

their relatives' last hours. "Why did they tell me to go on holiday? Surely they knew he was going to die," said Dorie Graham, whose husband Leonard died in 2000. She complained to the police more than a year ago.

Edna Purnell, 91, entered the hospital for rehabilitation after a hip replacement. She was put in a darkened room and heavily sedated, according to Mike Wilson, her son. Wilson consulted a solicitor and tried to get her moved to a private hospital. He was then himself rushed into hospital after a heart attack and while he was there she died.

The medical notes of Alice Wilkie, 88, record her as having died twice on the same day. Her granddaughter Emily Yeats believes this is because her files were mixed with those of Gladys Richards, 91, who died hours later. Both received cocktails of painkillers that investigations by the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) revealed should not have been used together.

A CHI report into the hospital's practice, published in July, criticised the use of diamorphine combined with a strong anaesthetic, and another drug usually used to treat schizophrenia. This combination, the report said, "could carry a risk of excessive sedation and respiratory depression in older patients, leading to death".

The CHI was originally asked to investigate the hospital by the police, who had begun a criminal investigation into the 1998 death of Richards, after her family alleged she had been

unlawfully killed.

Although the CHI report said it could not look at any particular death, it found doses of up to 200 milligrams a day of morphine were being administered through pumps into patients' bloodstreams. Prescriptions for morphine and other potent drugs were regularly written in advance, so that nurses could administer them unsupervised.

Ian Piper, the chief executive of the Gosport and Fareham primary care trust, which now administers the hospital, said he could not comment on individual cases. The trust has just sent its first draft of proposals to meet the 22 recommendations for change in the CHI report. Standards of care at the hospital had improved, said Piper.

Families of 10 of the dead patients attended a meeting called by Ian Readhead, deputy chief constable of Hampshire, last week. Police said a file on the affair will be sent to the Crown Prosecution Service this month. The Nursing and Midwifery Council said it was investigating disciplinary proceedings against several nurses.

Donaldson has commissioned Richard Baker, professor of clinical governance at Leicester University, to repeat the statistical analysis he conducted into Shipman's practice.

Donaldson said previous inquiries into patient concerns at Gosport had not established whether patterns of death were "out of line with what would be expected". Baker will seek to answer the question fully.

News of the World  
15 September 2002

## New old folks death probe

THE professor who investigated serial killer Dr Harold Shipman is to head a probe into hospital deaths.

Richard Barker will lead the third inquiry into the deaths of at least eight elderly patients at Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

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# Inquiry launched into 'suspicious deaths' at hospital

John Carvel  
Social affairs editor

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 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 Eastbourne, East Sussex, 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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## CPS to look at hospital deaths

A third inquiry into the deaths of elderly patients at a cottage hospital was announced yesterday as police said they were sending new evidence on four of them to the Crown Prosecution Service.

Nine elderly people died at Gosport War Memorial Hospital, Hampshire, amid

allegations of unlawful killing and over-use of pain-killing drugs. Police are in touch with the General Medical Council and the Commission for Health Improvement.

Police first investigated the case of a 91-year-old woman. Officers were then contacted by eight other families.