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INQUIRY: Police investigation of 91-year-old woman's death may lead to probe into hundreds of other cases

Mystery at the War Memorial

A HOSPITAL was today at the centre of a major police investigation into the alleged unlawful killing of an elderly patient.

Detectives have sent a file on the case to be examined by prosecutors after a long-running inquiry into events surrounding the death of a 91-year-old woman at Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

And senior officers say they cannot rule out having to reopen files on hundreds more deaths at the hospital if charges are brought over the death of the pensioner.

The probe was triggered by a complaint from the woman's family over the standard of care she received at the hospital in the days before she died there in August 1998.

Today her daughter, Gillian Mackenzie, refused to be drawn on the inquiry but said: 'I hope I will never see anyone die in the circumstances in which my mother died.'

Detectives working on the inquiry have interviewed a number of medical staff at the hospital.

None has been arrested or questioned under caution, but officers have sent a file to the Crown Prosecution Service seeking advice on how they might proceed with the inquiry.

Lawyers are now deciding whether there is sufficient evidence to bring a prosecution for alleged unlawful killing.

The *News* understands that if they do so, senior officers will consider reopening files on the deaths of other patients at the hospital.

One source told *The News* the deaths of as many as 600 elderly people could be re-examined. It is thought the use of the pain-killing drug diamorphine might form a part of any future inquiry.

In a statement today Hampshire police said: 'Police have completed their investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of a 91-year-old woman from Lee-on-the-Solent after a complaint by her family.'

'She died in August 1998 at the War Memorial Hospital in Gosport after being transferred there from Royal Hospital Haslar.

'In line with patient confidentiality, we cannot reveal the nature of her medical condition.

'We have the full co-operation of Portsmouth HealthCare (NHS) Trust and the Royal Hospital Haslar for our investigation.

'A file has been sent to the CPS and police are awaiting a decision.'

by Jonathan Carter
The News

Detective Superintendent Steve Watts, who is overseeing the case, refused to comment on the inquiry but said: 'I can confirm it is an allegation of unlawful killing.'

The inquiry is being led by Detective Chief Inspector Ray Burt, who was put in charge of the investigation after Mrs Mackenzie, 67, who lives in East Sussex, criticised the initial handling by Gosport CID.

Asked whether he could rule out a future inquiry involving the deaths of other patients at the War Memorial Hospital, he said: 'When the CPS makes a decision in this case, whatever that might be, a decision will be made as to what would be the most appropriate course of action to take.'

'We are conscious of the fact that we are dealing with extremely sensitive issues and any decision about any further action will be taken with great care and consideration for all persons who may potentially be involved.'

The 91-year-old woman whose death prompted the police inquiry is understood to have been sent to Gosport War Memorial to recover after an operation at nearby Haslar.

It is believed she had to go back to Haslar for further treatment before being transferred again to the War Memorial, where she died.

Today the Portsmouth HealthCare (NHS) Trust confirmed it had investigated a complaint over the standard of her care.

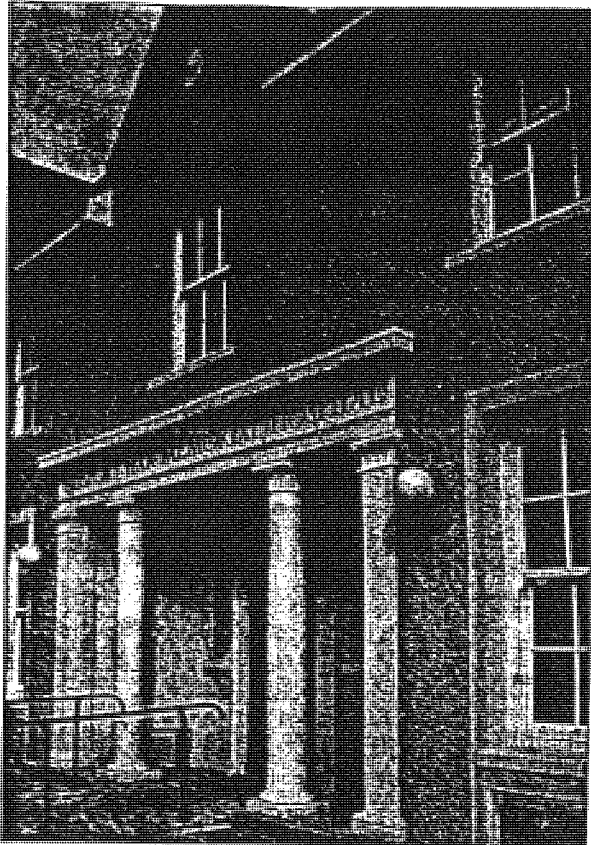
Operations director Ian Piper told *The News*: 'The trust did receive a complaint in August 1998 about the standard of care related to the lady concerned. We always take complaints very seriously and that complaint was investigated.'

'No member of staff has been disciplined as a result of the investigation into the complaint received about the standard of care at Gosport War Memorial Hospital.'

Mr Piper said that the trust was told by police in December 1998 that an investigation into Mrs Mackenzie's complaint was being launched.

He added: 'We want to stress that patient safety is very important to us as a trust.'

'At the end of the day the decision is with the CPS about what the next step will be. If the CPS does identify that there is a case to be answered, then clearly we need to take appropriate action.'



The War Memorial Hospital, Gosport, is at the centre of a police probe

Daughter's complaint leads to rap for detectives

THE daughter of the 91-year-old patient today launched a stinging attack on the original police investigation into the death of her mother.

Gillian Mackenzie, who lives in Sussex, rounded on the handling of the inquiry by a Gosport CID team insisting officers failed to do a proper job.

She protested to the Police Complaints Authority.

It upheld her complaint and as a result disciplinary action was taken against Detective Inspector Steph Morgan of Gosport police and a second officer.

Hampshire police confirmed that a detective inspector was disciplined for an 'inappropriate remark' made to Mrs Mackenzie and the second officer was disciplined for 'investigative failures'.

Mrs Mackenzie said: 'I went with a serious concern to Gosport police station and they prepared a file for consideration by the CPS.'

The file contained no statements - not even a written statement from me - no interviews and no medical reports. In fact, I don't know what they had in the file.

'Literally within a few weeks I had a phone call from a police officer saying it was his opinion that there was no case to answer.'

Mrs Mackenzie described the second police investigation - led by DCI Ray Burt, now based at Winchester police headquarters - as 'first-class'.



Ian Piper: Aware



DI Steph Morgan

Town fought for its hospital

GOSPORT War Memorial Hospital provides services for elderly patients, including those with mental health problems, as well as mothers and babies on the Blake maternity unit.

Eleven doctors are contracted to work at the hospital, including consultants and senior house officers. More than 40 GPs in the Gosport area also have an input, as well as staff from Haslar.

From a modest beginning with 26 beds on opening in 1923 - built by Gosport-based Royal Marines with

money raised from local people to honour comrades killed in the first world war - the hospital has more than trebled in size.

The people of Gosport are proud of the complex - and defensive of it.

When it was threatened with closure in a 1980s health shake-up, a huge campaign was launched which not only convinced health chiefs to keep it open but also to invest in it. A £10m revamp made the hospital much bigger and gave it a range of state-of-the-art facilities.

