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Doctor to face hearing over patient deaths

GP could be struck off register over prescription of 'excessive' drug doses

• By Jeremy Laurance, Health Editor

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A doctor who prescribed painkilling drugs to five patients, which contributed to their deaths at a hospital in Portsmouth, is facing a charge of serious professional misconduct.

If found guilty, Jane Barton, who was the senior doctor in charge at the Gosport War Memorial Hospital, may be struck off the medical register.

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A hearing before a disciplinary panel of the General Medical Council (GMC) is to begin on 8 June and is expected to last 11 weeks. It follows an inquest into the deaths, which concluded last month that three of the five patients were wrongly prescribed excessive doses of diamorphine (medicinal heroin) which hastened their deaths. The two other patients who died were also prescribed drugs which contributed to their deaths but the prescribing was appropriate for their condition, the inquest jury found.

The jury ruled in all five cases the drugs had been prescribed for therapeutic reasons and there was no suggestion that the overdoses had been deliberate. The deaths of five other patients investigated were not caused by the drugs they were taking, it found.

The verdict followed a decade-long series of inquiries by police and the NHS into almost 100 deaths at the hospital in the late 1990s.

Dr Barton, a GP, worked part time at the community hospital in the 1990s, when the deaths occurred. The charges relate to the treatment of 12 patients and allege that the starting doses of diamorphine were too high, the dosage range too wide, that Dr Barton failed to consult colleagues when a patient's condition deteriorated and did not keep accurate notes.

At the inquest, it emerged that Dr Barton had introduced a system of pre-emptive prescribing which allowed nurses to increase the amount of painkillers without the need for a doctor's presence.

The deaths occurred during the period from 1996 to 1999. Dr Barton left the hospital in 2000 but still works as a GP in Gosport.

A spokeswoman for the GMC said the 10-year delay in bringing the case against Dr Barton was because the council had to wait until the police inquiries were complete. The GMC imposed conditions on Dr Barton's registration last July, as an interim measure, under which she is banned from prescribing diamorphine.