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10 elderly patients died at hospital amid 'drugging' claims

The deaths of 10 elderly patients at a hospital at the centre of an investigation into the alleged over-use of painkillers a decade ago are to be examined at an inquest.

By Richard Savill

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The 10 were among 92 deaths at Gosport War Memorial Hospital investigated by police, but no prosecutions were ever brought.

As well as the police investigation, an inquiry was held by the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) which criticised prescribing practices at the hospital.

As the inquest opened yesterday, the families of those who had died at the hospital said they hoped the hearing would "get to the truth".

They have fought for several years for the deaths to be fully investigated, believing that there has not yet been a satisfactory explanation.

The inquest in Portsmouth heard that Dr Jane Barton, the clinician "primarily involved", would be among those giving evidence at the six week hearing.

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She was the only individual to have been investigated by police in connection with the deaths, but was not charged with any offence.

John White, who is representing four of the 10 families, said before the hearing that the allegations were "of the most serious kind.

"Several investigations have now taken place over many years but none has so far managed to get to a resolution.

"Given the time that has elapsed and the mass of information, I think the coroner will have a very difficult task but with our work and the efforts of the families I hope that he will get to the truth."

Andrew Bradley, the coroner, said the Justice Secretary Jack Straw had given special permission for the hearing because seven of the bodies had been cremated.

He said each of the 10 patients had gone to the hospital for palliative care. The jury's task was to reach a verdict on how the 10 patients died, but it was not to attribute liability for the deaths on any individual.

As well as the police investigation, an inquiry was held by the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) which criticised prescribing practices at the hospital.

The Government's chief medical officer, Sir Liam Donaldson, also commissioned a clinical audit to examine death rates at the hospital in September 2002.

Richard Baker, a professor of clinical governance who worked on the Harold Shipman inquiry, was appointed to the task but his results have not been made public.

Mr Bradley told the hearing that Prof Baker's report would not be included in the inquest evidence but said it would be made available to the families after the hearing was concluded. Sir Peter Viggers, Conservative MP for Gosport, said that the inquest should not be held as sufficient inquiries had already taken place into care at the hospital.

The inquests are being held into the deaths of Arthur Cunningham, 79, from Gosport who died on Sept 26, 1998; Elsie Devine, 88, on Nov 21, 1999; Sheila Gregory, 91, of Gosport, on Nov 22, 1999 and Ruby Lake, 84, of Gosport, on Aug 21, 1998.

The other deaths are of Elsie Lavender, 83, of Gosport, on March 6, 1996; Geoffrey Packman, 67, of Emsworth, on Sept 3, 1999; Code A 82, on Jan 24, 1996; Helena Service, 99, of Gosport, on June 5, 1997; Enid Spurgin, 92, of Gosport, on April 13, 1999, and Robert Wilson, 75, of Sarisbury Green, on Oct 18, 1998.

The hearing continues