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Jury sworn in at Gosport War Memorial Hospital inquests

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A jury was sworn into today at an inquest being held to investigate the deaths of 10 elderly patients at a hospital which has been investigated by police for allegations of over-prescribing painkillers.

Coroner Andrew Bradley told the panel of five women and four men that the hearing was to find out how the 10 patients of the Gosport War Memorial Hospital died more than 10 years ago.

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He explained that the joint inquest being held at Portsmouth Coroner's Court had to be given special permission by the Justice secretary Jack Straw because seven of the bodies had since been cremated.

The hearing, which is expected to last six weeks, was also told that only one of the patients had undergone a post-mortem examination.

Mr Bradley explained that each of the 10 patients had gone to the hospital and had died.

Mr Bradley told the jury that it would hear evidence from members of the patients' families, medical experts and staff at the hospital.

Among those to give evidence will be Dr Jane Barton, the only individual to have been investigated by police in connection with deaths at the hospital but who was not charged with any offence.

Mr Bradley said: "During the relevant time, Dr Barton was the clinician primarily involved."

He explained to the jury that its task was to reach a verdict on how the 10 patients died but not to attribute liability for the deaths on any individual.

Hampshire police have carried out a series of investigations into the treatment of 92 patients at the Gosport War Memorial Hospital in the late 1990s.

Their families believe that sedatives such as diamorphine were over-prescribed at the hospital and led to the death of their relatives who were receiving recuperative care.

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

He said: "Because the report is too directional and to avoid finger-pointing and issues of liability, I do not want it to be introduced in these proceedings."

Hampshire police referred the results of its inquiry in relation to some of the deaths to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), which decided not to prosecute.

John White, who is representing four of the 10 families, said ahead of today's hearing: "The allegations in this case are 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.

"We have asked the Ministry of Justice to fund our representation because of the wider public interest issues.

"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."

Cllr Ken Thornber, leader of Hampshire County Council, said a public inquiry and not an inquest would be the only way of establishing all of the facts in relation to the deaths.

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

The other deaths are of Elsie Lavender, 83, of Gosport, on March 6, 1996; Geoffrey Packman, 67, of Emsworth, on September 3, 1999; Code A 82, on January 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 October 18, 1998.