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Excessive, dangerous workload for doctor

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The doctor at the centre of elderly patient deaths had an 'excessive and dangerous workload', a panel heard.

Jane Barton was under 'intolerable pressure' as clinical assistant at Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

The family GP, whose conduct is being examined in relation to 12 deaths on her wards between 1995 and 1999, repeatedly raised concerns over her workload and had asked for more help, the General Medical Council heard yesterday.

Speaking for the first time before the five-strong panel, Dr Barton said she was 'sustaining an excessive and dangerous workload' shortly before quitting her post in 2000 while being investigated by police on suspicion of attempted murder.

In a letter prior to her resignation – which was read out at the London hearing – she wrote: 'The current police investigation into a charge of attempted murder only serves to highlight the almost impossible task faced by a team dedicated to offering seriously ill patients a dignified and peaceful passing.'

Dr Barton said she 'pre-prescribed' wide dose ranges of powerful sedatives and painkillers.

This meant they could be given out even when she was not at the hospital.

In another letter read out during the hearing yesterday, Dr Barton told her bosses without further help she was 'unable to do her job to a safe and acceptable standard'. She added: 'I'm finding the pressure on me to continue to provide what I consider appropriate care for patient, proper consultation with their relatives and support of my hard-pressed nursing staff almost intolerable.'

Dr Barton was first investigated following the death of Gladys Richards at the War Memorial in 1999. But the Crown Prosecution service later dropped the case due to insufficient evidence.

Dr Barton has admitted she failed to keep adequate notes and that some prescriptions were 'potentially hazardous'.

She also said dose ranges of painkiller diamorphine and sedative midazolam she prescribed to some patients were too wide, and could have led to them being given too many drugs.

However, she denies serious professional misconduct.

(Proceeding).

PRE-PRESCRIBED

Powerful drugs were pre-prescribed to elderly hospital patients to preserve their comfort and dignity while they were dying, Dr Jane Barton said yesterday.

She said she prescribed cocktails of sedatives and painkiller diamorphine – a form of heroin – to 12 Gosport War Memorial Hospital patients in advance in case patients were in pain when she was not there.

Dr Barton also said that concerns over the calibre of some doctors who could be called on out-of-hours if she could not be contacted led to the culture of 'proactive prescribing'.

When asked by defence counsel Timothy Langdale QC why she wrote out prescriptions for controlled drugs in advance, Dr Barton said: 'It was mainly to ensure the maximum comfort and dignity for my patients. It was not for my convenience. It was not for the convenience of the nursing staff.'

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