

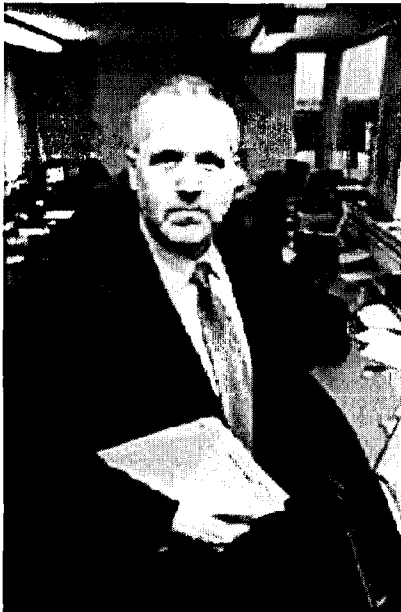
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Thursday, 23rd October 2008

Top cop defends deaths inquiry



Assistant Chief Constable Steve Watts



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A top police officer has defended a four-year investigation into dozens of deaths that ended up with no-one facing any criminal charges.

Despite the mammoth inquiry, Hampshire's Assistant Chief Constable, Steve Watts, pictured left, admitted detectives were not surprised by the decision not to prosecute anyone following concerns about the deaths of pensioners at Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

He insisted it had been right to carry out such a detailed and lengthy investigation, after strong criticism from Gosport MP Peter Viggers that the matter should have been dropped years ago, but flatly refused to reveal the cost of the probe.

Investigations into dozens of deaths at the hospital have gone on for eight years but now appear over. During the fourth and latest probe, begun in 2002, between four and 12 police officers at a time investigated up to 92 deaths, quizzing hundreds of witnesses and taking hundreds of statements.

They examined deaths between 1990 and 2002 and eventually sent 10 files to lawyers at the Crown Prosecution Service for them to judge whether there should be charges for gross negligence leading to manslaughter.

The allegations centred on whether elderly patients were given excessive doses of strong painkillers, but this week the CPS finally said no-one will go to court.

Assist Chief Con Watts told The News: 'I'm satisfied the resources allocated to it were appropriate and properly managed against other demands.'

'I'm convinced we've gathered every piece of evidence that could be gathered. I don't think there's anything out there been missed.'

He defended the three earlier police probes as 'appropriate', despite complaints against them from grieving relatives.

He said 'a number' of hospital staff had been investigated but refused to say how many, insisting: 'There was no criminal culpability.'

Assist Chief Con Watts refused to criticise the CPS for deciding not to take any of the cases to court. 'It wasn't a surprise,' he said.

'Our position as investigators is to gather evidence. It's for the CPS and the courts to decide how that evidence meets criminal standards.'

'There's no further investigation by Hampshire Constabulary,' he added.

The General Medical Council and Nursing and Midwifery Council may now look at the evidence amassed by the police to see if any medical staff should face disciplinary actions.

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