

The Portsmouth Evening News: Hospital gave death news coldly, son claims

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Inquests are being held at Portsmouth Coroner's Court into the death of 10 patients at the Gosport War Memorial Hospital (GWMH) more than 10 years ago. Hampshire police have carried out a series of investigations into the treatment of 92 patients at the Hampshire hospital in the late 1990s but no prosecutions were brought by the Crown Prosecution Service. 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. br/>>>>

Follow our live coverage of the inquests. Click here. As well as the police investigation, an inquiry was held by the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) which criticised prescribing practices at the hospital. Elsie Lavender, a widow from Gosport, suffered a stroke in early 1996 and was initially treated at the Royal Naval Hospital Haslar before being transferred to the GWMH on February 22, 1996. The 83-year-old had suffered from diabetes for 50 years and as well as the stroke, she had suffered a head injury in a fall down the stairs at her home. Her son Alan Lavender told the inquest that he understood that his mother was transferred to Daedalus stroke rehabilitation ward at GWMH for rehabilitative care. But he added that he was shocked when Dr Jane Barton told him in a 'callous' manner that his mother 'had come to the hospital to die'. He said that he had asked Dr Barton when his mother would be able to return home as they had to make arrangements concerning her cat. He said that Dr Barton had replied: 'You can get rid of the cat. Do you know your mother has come here to die.' Mr Lavender added: 'I was shocked at the way this was said to me. I did not know that to be the case, I thought she had gone into the hospital for rehabilitation.' I couldn't believe the cold way the news had been broken to me, as if it was pre-determined, I was shocked.' Dr Barton, who was the primary clinician involved in the 10 cases, has been the only individual to be investigated but no charges were made against her. Mrs Lavender was to die at the hospital on March 6, 1996, with the cause of death stated to be a stroke. Mr Lavender said: 'I am concerned at the rapid deterioration of my mother when she went into Gosport War Memorial Hospital.' I accept she was an elderly lady however she appeared to be making a full recovery from a stroke. She was strong and lucid.' Alan Jenkins, representing Dr Barton, suggested that the severity of his mother's condition was explained to him during the course of several conversations. Mr Lavender replied: 'It is hard to recall exactly what happened but I have described it as it appeared to me.' Mr Lavender also said he could not recall being told by Dr Barton or staff at the hospital that a syringe driver would be put in place to provide his mother with painkilling medication diamorphine. A syringe driver is a battery-powered device to provide injections over a period of time. He said this was only explained to him after he saw it was being used. Sheelagh Joines, a retired ward sister who worked on Daedalus ward at GWMH at the time of Mrs Lavender's death, said that she could not remember Mrs Lavender. But Ms Joines, who retired in 1997, explained that it was normal practice for the family of a patient to always be informed before a syringe driver was set up. She said: 'If a patient's condition was deteriorating and they had to have a syringe driver put up, Dr Barton or I would always explain why a syringe driver would be put up.' We would never put a syringe driver up without the family agreeing to it.' She added that it was practice on the ward for Dr Barton to write a prescription for larger doses of painkillers such as diamorphine so that their medication could be increased up to a set level without delay. She said: 'When necessary, patients could be written up (prescribed) prior to it being given to prevent their pain as quickly as possible but it wasn't done on a regular basis.' She added that the dosage of medication would only be increased if the patient was obviously in pain. She said: 'We would never increase it unless it was absolutely necessary.' She explained that this method of advanced prescription was put in place because of a shortage of doctors. The inquest heard that Daedalus ward only had a doctor present for one hour a day on weekdays alone. Ms Joines said that if they had not had advanced prescriptions, a doctor would have had to have been brought into the hospital each time a patient's condition deteriorated. Ms Joines added that although Daedalus was a ward for stroke rehabilitation, not all patients transferred there were suitable for such care. She explained that sometimes patients were placed at Daedalus to prevent 'bed-blocking' at other major hospitals in the area. Mr Jenkins suggested to Ms Joines that occasionally relatives had 'unrealistic expectations' of the patient's ability to recover. Ms Joines replied: 'Sometimes the patient's relative was told they were being sent to Daedalus for rehabilitation and this caused problems because we could see this wasn't the case.' She also defended Dr Barton who she worked alongside for nine years. She said: 'I always found her to be very compassionate, very open with patients and patients' relatives.' She was a caring doctor - her patients' welfare was all that she strode to achieve.' I have had no objections for working for her, I admire her as a doctor and I had no reservations at the treatment she asked me to give over the years.' I have never, ever heard her speak to a patient as Mr Lavender described how she spoke to him, she was always very professional.' The inquests, expected to last six weeks, are being held into the deaths 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; Leslie Pittock, 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. Follow our live coverage of the inquests. Click here. As well as the police investigation, an inquiry was held by the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) which criticised prescribing practices at the hospital. Elsie Lavender, a widow from Gosport, suffered a stroke in early 1996 and was initially treated at the Royal Naval Hospital Haslar before being transferred to the GWMH on February 22, 1996. The 83-year-old had suffered from diabetes for 50 years and as well as the stroke, she had suffered a head injury in a fall down the stairs at her home. 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• *Index terms: Deaths; General News; Health & Healthcare; Admin of Human Resource Programs; Admin of Public Health Programs; Ambulatory Health Care Services; General Medical & Surgical Hospitals; Health Care & Social Assistance; Hospitals; Justice Public Order & Safety Activities; Legal Counsel & Prosecution; Offices of Physicians; Offices of Physicians exc Mental Health; Police Protection; Public Admin; Admin of Human Resource Programs; Admin of Public Health Programs; Ambulatory Health Care Services; General Medical ; Health Care ; Hospitals; Justice Public Order ; Legal Counsel ; Offices of Physicians; Offices of Physicians exc Mental Health; Police Protection; Public Admin; Cia Colombiana de Inversiones SA; Crown Prosecution Service UK*

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