

Gosport doctor's fate in the balance at medical hearing - NewsLib Dems call for Shipman-style inquiry after 'abject failure' of the system to address suspicious deaths

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MPs will demand this week a public inquiry into the suspicious deaths of scores of elderly patients at Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

An early-day motion calling for an independent inquiry "with equivalent powers to the Shipman inquiry" into the treatment of patients at the Hampshire hospital between 1989 and 2000 was tabled by Liberal Democrat health spokesman, Norman Lamb, on Friday; MPs can register support for the motion from tomorrow. It comes days before the fate of Jane Barton, the doctor at centre of the allegations, is decided at a General Medical Council hearing.

The disciplinary hearing which began in June 2009 - eight years after the case was referred to the GMC by Hampshire police and relatives of the dead - reconvened last Monday. GMC lawyers said the findings against Dr Barton were so serious, as was her failure to show any insight or remorse into these findings, that she must be found guilty of serious professional misconduct and struck off the register.

Lawyers acting for Dr Barton dismissed these arguments as completely unjustified and described her as a "good, experienced, conscientious and caring family doctor who continues to provide an important and vital service for her community".

But MPs and patient safety campaigners argue that a public inquiry is essential regardless of the GMC outcome. They argue an independent investigation into allegations of incompetence and damaging delays by several public bodies, including government departments, is essential to learn lessons from the case. Previous calls for an inquiry have been rejected.

Mr Lamb said yesterday: "There has been an abject failure by the system to address concerns of the utmost seriousness in this case and lessons must be learnt. It is fundamental that relatives who have legitimate concerns about the circumstances surrounding the deaths of their loved ones need to be respected and listened to by the system, and not treated with a degree of high-handedness which has been the hallmark of this case."

Nurses at Gosport first raised concerns about the increasing use of syringe drivers to administer powerful painkillers and sedatives for elderly patients, many of whom died within days, in 1991. No further action was taken by hospital management or nurses apart from a few training sessions about end-of-life care. Police investigated after a complaint by Gillian McKenzie in 1998 following the death of her mother, Gladys Richards, 91. Complaints about the initial police investigation were later upheld by the Police Complaints Authority.

A subsequent, wider investigation into 92 deaths did not result in a prosecution. The Crown Prosecution Service is re-examining the case.

Dr Barton voluntarily agreed to stop prescribing opiates and to stop working in hospitals in 2002. She continued as a Gosport GP and has an unblemished record, her lawyers say. Last week 184 testimonials were presented to the hearing to demonstrate her popularity and respect among patients and colleagues, her lawyers said. The panel previously concluded that Dr Barton prescribed doses which were inappropriate, potentially hazardous and not in patients' best interests. The panel must decide whether her failings are serious enough to justify greater sanctions. Tom Kark, counsel for the GMC, said: "The panel has a duty to assure the public that they are safe when their care is entrusted to a doctor.... The failings demonstrated in the case were so serious that, despite the passage of time, the only sanction that will protect the public is one of erasure [from the medical register]."

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