

Families prompt hospital deaths inquiry

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Families are hoping to uncover the truth about the deaths of elderly relatives at a hospital after the Government ordered an investigation.

Sir Liam Donaldson, the Chief Medical Officer, has ordered the inquiry into death rates at Gosport War Memorial Hospital in Hampshire.

It is only the second time that he has ordered such an investigation: the first was in the case of Harold Shipman, the doctor who killed hundreds of his patients.

Sir Liam said an audit of medical records and interviews with staff would be carried out to establish whether "patterns of death were out of line with what would be expected". Hampshire police are investigating whether any criminal intent was involved.

Complaints have been received from up to 13 families of patients who were admitted between 1997 and 2000. They fear mistreatment or overdoses of powerful painkillers may have been involved.

"There has to have been something wrong for this many people to complain," said Marjorie Bulbeck of Emsworth, Hampshire, whose mother, Dulcie Middleton, 85, died in September 2001.

She said: "I am pleased this has been set up because we have been struggling for this. We have got elderly people who are frightened to go into hospital."

An audit of hospital records will be carried out by Richard Baker, a Professor of Clinical Governance at Leicester University. He conducted an analysis of Shipman's career which led to the public inquiry.

In July government inspectors criticised the Portsmouth Healthcare NHS Trust, the authority that ran the hospital until April, for excessive use of pain relieving drugs.

Patients were put at risk, but inspectors would not say whether anyone had died as a result of their treatment.

The inspectors' report was triggered by allegations from the family of Gladys Richards, 91, that she was unlawfully killed in August 1998.

Professor Baker will draw on medical records, staff rotas, times of death, the amount of drugs given and condition of each patient who died to establish if there are any links.

Ian Piper, chief executive of the Fareham and Gosport Primary Care Trust, the health group that oversees the running of the hospital, said: "I sympathise with the relatives. We want to do everything we can to find some answers for these families."

Many changes had been made to procedures at the hospital since 1998, he said.

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