

No one charged over string of baby deaths

Grieving families want to know why no staff have yet been sanctioned for 30 fatalities at Furness General, writes Sarah-Kate Templeton

WHEN James Titcombe's newborn son, Joshua, appeared unwell, he repeatedly asked midwives whether the infant needed antibiotics.

His wife, Hoa, had collapsed shortly after giving birth and was given antibiotics to treat an infection. Titcombe was surprised to learn that Joshua did not need the medication, but trusted what he was told.

Joshua collapsed from overwhelming infection and died days later. An inquest into his death found a long list of shortcomings, including that midwives had failed to monitor or record signs in his condition that could have led to a doctor being called earlier.

The coroner also criticised

The people in charge

Ministers said that Morecambe Bay laid bare a "rotten scandal" where institutional secrecy was put ahead of patients. Officials involved included:

■ Tony Halsall, former head of the University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust. Stepped down in 2012 after a police inquiry was launched. Took a secondment with the NHS Confederation before moving to the private sector.

■ Mike Farrar, former head of the North West Strategic Health Authority, which was accused of failings over Morecambe Bay. Went on to be head of the NHS Confederation. Stood down in September 2013 and became a healthcare consultant.

■ Cynthia Bower, former head of the Care Quality Commission. Denies claims of involvement in a cover-up of inspection failures at Morecambe Bay. Left the CQC in 2012 with a pension pot of more than £1.3m.

■ Sir David Nicholson, former head of NHS England. Accused of failing to tackle institutional problems at Morecambe Bay and other trusts.

midwives and paediatricians at the trust for not working together.

A government-commissioned investigation into maternity and neonatal care at University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Trust, to be published next month, is expected to find that up to 30 mothers and babies died following such failings between 2004 and 2013. The result is vindication for Titcombe, who realised other families must have suffered similar failures and fought for an inquiry.

The investigation has heard there was a feud between

midwives and doctors working there. The scandal was covered up for almost a decade. One midwife told the investigation her colleagues felt that if they called a doctor, they were made to feel irrelevant and pushed to one side as the doctor took control.

A month after Joshua died in November 2008 the Titcombes were told that the key record of his care had been "lost". The investigation heard that the loss of key medical notes was common.

Bereaved families also want to know why, more than six years after the death of their loved ones, not a single midwife, nurse or doctor has been dismissed. Six midwives face disciplinary hearings by their regulator, the Nursing and Midwifery Council, later this year. Families cannot understand why it has taken so long to hold staff to account.

James Titcombe said: "It is ridiculously slow. It is now 2015 and there is still an open investigation [of wrongdoing by staff]. What about protecting mums and babies? The time-scale is a disgrace."

Just two months before Joshua's death, Liza Brady and her husband, Simon Davey, lost their baby son, Alex, at the same hospital, Furness General. They believe that had the labour been under the supervision of a consultant obstetrician, rather than a midwife, Alex would have survived.

At 39 weeks, he was estimated to weigh around 10lb. He was 11lb 13½oz at birth. During the labour Liza repeatedly asked for a caesarean section, but the calls for medical intervention were ignored. In an account of the death, Liza wrote: "The midwife was determined to deliver Alex. It was clear there was tension between the midwives and doctors."

Eventually a doctor did intervene to deliver Alex, but it was too late. He was born with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck and could not be resuscitated.

Four years earlier, in 2004, a similar tragedy had occurred. Lesley Bennett had experienced complications in earlier pregnancies, and scans showed baby Eleanor was large for her gestation. She was born weighing 10lb 10oz.

Bennett raised concerns about the lack of monitoring of her baby by midwives during labour, and in particular checks on the foetal heartbeat. Her concerns were dismissed. When the labour got into difficulty Bennett's midwife called in two other midwives, but failed to seek a doctor's help.

Eleanor died a day after she was born.

For seven years the trust misled the Bennetts about the cause of Eleanor's death, claiming the tragedy was "just one of those things". Finally, in 2013, bosses admitted that "on the balance of probabilities"

Eleanor would have lived if proper care had been given.

Carl Hendrickson, whose wife Nittaya and son Chester died at the trust a couple of months before Joshua and

Alex, tells a similar story of a midwife's reluctance to call in medical help, even when lives were in danger. "They should have got a doctor earlier," he said. "I took the midwife to one

side because I didn't want to upset my wife. I said, 'Look, my wife is in distress, she needs a doctor.' The midwife would walk back to the bed and say, 'Nittaya and I are going to

deliver this baby, we don't need a doctor.' There were — several times when she [the midwife] should definitely have got a doctor."

Hendrickson maintains that

records of the foetal heartbeat and contractions have gone missing.

The General Medical Council declined to say whether any doctors were being investi-

gated over the scandal. University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Trust did not wish to comment on any action taken against staff ahead of the publication of the investigation.