

NHS 'scandal' over unexpected deaths of mental health patients

By Laura Donnelly HEALTH EDITOR

THE NHS has failed to investigate the unexpected deaths of more than 1,000 people since 2011, a report has found.

Charities called for action to tackle "a national scandal" and said hundreds of patients with learning disabilities were dying needlessly amid failings in care, without lessons being learnt.

A report obtained by the BBC says a "failure of leadership" at Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust meant deaths of mental health and learning-disability patients were not properly examined.

The investigation was ordered after the death of one of the trust's patients, Connor Sparrowhawk, 18, who drowned in a bath in Oxford in 2013 following an epileptic seizure.

An independent inquiry said his death had been preventable, and an inquest jury found neglect by the trust had been a contributory factor.

The trust, one of the largest community health, specialist mental health and learning disability services in the country, covers Hampshire, Dorset, Wiltshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire.

The investigation, commissioned by NHS England and carried out by Mazars, an audit firm, looked at all deaths at the trust between April 2011 and March 2015.

It found 10,306 people had died including 1,454 which were not expected. Of those, just 195 were treated by the trust as a serious incident requiring investigation.

Deaths of patients with learning disabilities and elderly people with mental health problems were the least likely to

be probed. Just one per cent of learning disability fatalities were investigated, along with 0.3 per cent of over-65s with mental health problems, the report said.

The average age at death of those with a learning disability was 56 – more than seven years younger than the national average.

The trust said last night it said: "We recognise the numbers in this draft report but they have been completely misinterpreted. More than half of the 1,454 deaths quoted in the draft report were expected and of those that were

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initially reported as unexpected, the majority were not clinically avoidable.

"Of the 1,454, more than 90 per cent were deaths of people not in our hospitals."

The report lays the blame with the trust board and accuses it of failing to show effective leadership.

It concludes: "We have little confidence that the trust has fully recognised the need for it to improve its reporting and investigation of deaths."

Sara Ryan, Connor Sparrowhawk's mother, said: "There is no reason why in 2015 a report like this should come out. It's a total scandal. It just sickens me."

An NHS England spokesman said: "We are determined that all the issues should be examined and lessons clearly identified and acted upon."

Telegraph 10th December 2015