

Investigation into cluster of NHS baby deaths

Kat Lay Health Correspondent

The health secretary has ordered an investigation into a series of baby deaths at an NHS trust, many of which involved a failure to monitor the baby's heart rate correctly.

There have been at least seven avoidable deaths in less than two years at the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust, according to a BBC investigation.

Jeremy Hunt has asked NHS England and NHS Improvement, the regulator, to contact the families involved in the deaths, as well as other incidents at the trust, to ensure that they had been properly investigated. A failure to

monitor babies' heart rates during labour can lead to their brains being starved of oxygen if action is not taken to hasten birth.

Kelly Jones said that staff ignored her pleas to be assessed properly when she was pregnant with twins, to the extent that she tried to discharge herself because she was so unhappy with the care. Ella and Lola were stillborn in September 2014.

A letter from the trust to Ms Jones says that its investigation "shows that both babies had died from severe hypoxic ischemia [oxygen starvation to the brain] contributed to by delay in recognising deterioration in the foetal

heart traces and the missed opportunities for earlier delivery".

She told the BBC: "The midwife came in crying, saying, 'I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry'. Too late, damage is done. My girls are gone. Because they couldn't be bothered doing their job."

Although the letter, dated June 2015, promised improvements in heart rate monitoring, two months later a baby named Kye Hall died aged four days. His inquest found that the failure to listen to his heart rate at two points before delivery contributed to his death. Graham Scott Holmes-Smith, whose heart rate was not properly monitored during labour, died four

months later. Ivy Morris was born ten days after Graham and died in May 2015. A coroner ruled that her death could have been avoided with appropriate heart monitoring during labour.

Figures seen by *The Times* in June 2015 revealed that the most expensive claims to the NHS consistently related to the failure of doctors and midwives to monitor babies' heart rates properly, accounting for £268 million of claims in 2014.

Other cases at the trust involve staff failing to spot infection in a newborn, and one that could have been avoided with forceps or a caesarean delivery.

James Titcombe, the bereaved father

and safety campaigner who exposed the baby deaths scandal at Morecambe Bay, said there were parallels between the hospitals, including a focus on "normal" births and a "repeated failure to learn".

An analysis of NHS trusts last year found that Shrewsbury and Telford was one of the worst in the country when it came to learning from mistakes.

Edwin Borman, medical director at the Shrewsbury and Telford Trust, said: "In the case of foetal heart rate monitoring, we have identified a number of cases where learning has not been fully implemented. We've put systems in place to make improvements."