Hospital deaths inquiry looks into 800 certificates signed by Dr Opia
The families of patients who unexpectedly died at a hospital in Gosport, Hampshire, are demanding answers.

Lois Rogers

A retired female GP is at the centre of a £13m inquiry into hundreds of deaths that may have been caused by overdoses.

The death certificates of 833 patients at the Gosport War Memorial Hospital in Hampshire are being re-examined as part of the inquiry by the Gosport independent panel, which is investigating claims that many were given fatal overdoses of opiate painkillers.

“Violent man” and given enough drugs to lay out a 6ft violent man

My seven-stone grandmother, who did not have dementia and was recovering from a kidney infection, was pinned to the floor by four nurses and given enough drugs to lay out a 6ft violent man in a psychiatric ward,” claimed Bridget Reeves, 41. Her grandmother Elsie Devine, 88, died in 1999 after receiving substantial combined doses of the opiates and sedatives prescribed by Barton.

“These deaths have all happened behind closed doors and similar deaths are probably continuing to happen. We want people to be held accountable.”

By 2008, 92 families had come forward to allege that their relatives had been drugged and killed to death during the 1990s.

As a result of their pressure an inquest was held in 2009 into 10 of the fatalities, which occurred between 1996 and 1999. It concluded that opiates had contributed to the deaths of Devine and four others: Robert Wilson, 74, Geoffrey Packman, 67, Elsie Lavender, 83, and Arthur “Brian” Cunningham, 79.

A police investigation into Barton’s activities petered out in 2013.

“The whole thing has been the most monstrous cover-up,” said Cunningham’s stepson Charles Farthing, 78. “Brian was being treated for depression; there’s no way he was near death.”

Managers at Portsmouth Healthcare NHS Trust, which was disbanded in 2002, always denied there were any problems at Gosport.

However, in 2013 a campaign by sisters Gillian Mackenzie and Lesley O’Brien led to a second inquest into the 1998 death of their mother, Gladys Richards, 91.

Opiates were found to have contributed. Mackenzie, 83, of Eastbourne, East Sussex, said she hopes she will live until 2018 to see justice done.

“What went on at Gosport was just wicked,” said Mackenzie’s MP, Stephen Lloyd, who has been supporting her fight for justice since she contacted him 10 years ago. “It seems to me that there has been the most monstrous cover-up for many years. I hope this inquiry finally unearths the truth and gives these families peace.”

At least 10 police and NHS investigations from 1991 onwards have examined claims that patients were being killed at Gosport.

They have been helped by experts including Robert Forrest, the forensic toxicologist who gave evidence to the inquiry into the practice of Harold Shipman, the GP who murdered up to 260 patients largely with opiates.

The most recent inquiry into deaths at Gosport was commissioned in 2002 by the then chief medical officer, Sir Liam Donaldson, from Professor Richard Baker, of Leicester University, who completed his review in 2003.

It was not released until 10 years later at the conclusion of an investigation by Hampshire police.

In his report Baker said hospital records showed the words “Please make comfortable” were used as shorthand for the use of opiates.

Baker concluded a detailed investigation could decide whether “almost routine use of opiates ... shortened life.”

He also said that he expected such an investigation to show whether “it cannot be ruled out that a small number of these would otherwise have been eventually discharged from hospital alive” if the drugs had not been prescribed.
Barton, who retired in 2010, worked part-time at the Gosport hospital from 1988 to 2000.

"It's no different to Hillsborough, where people have waited so long to get justice," said Reeves. "No one wants to talk about it."

Barton still lives in Gosport with her husband, Tim, a former Royal Navy commodore.

In 2010 she told the GMC that she had faced an "excessive and increasing burden" caring for patients and had been under "unreasonable" pressure.

On Friday afternoon her husband said she did not want to comment further.

**Additional reporting: Vincent Wood**