

Hospital deaths inquiry looks into 800 certificates signed by Dr Opiate

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 on the instructions of Jane Barton, a former doctor.

More than 120 families who believe their relatives may have been killed have now come forward to the panel, which is led by James Jones, the former Bishop of Liverpool, who chaired the 2012 inquiry into the Hillsborough disaster. The panel is due to report next spring.

Barton, 68, worked part-time as a clinical assistant at the Gosport hospital between 1988 and 2000, and signed most of the death certificates.

A report published in 2013 into concerns about her work concluded that the practice of "almost routine use of opiates before death" had almost certainly shortened the lives of some patients.

Inquests into six patient deaths and previous NHS inquiries have already found the drugs used by Barton at Gosport contributed to deaths.

After a General Medical Council (GMC) investigation lasting almost a decade, Barton was found guilty of serious professional misconduct by a GMC disciplinary panel in 2010.

She was told she had "failed to recognise the limits of her professional competence" and had prescribed drugs in a way that was "excessive, inappropriate and potentially hazardous".

Although she was barred from using opiates and had 10 other restrictions placed on her ability to practise as a doctor, she was not struck off and chose to retire two months later.

Relatives who have sought answers for almost two decades about the deaths of loved ones hope the new inquiry will

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My seven-stone grandmother was pinned to the floor and given enough drugs to lay out a 6ft violent man

provide them. "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 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 bedsores; there's no way he was near death"

Managers at Portsmouth Healthcare NHS Trust, which was disbanded in 2002, always flatly 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 there has been the most enormous 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



Gladys Richards, 91, was 'condemned to death' by medication, her daughter claims



Arthur Cunningham died in 1998 at 79. Stepson claims there was a 'cover-up'



Elsie Devine died in 1999 at age 88. Her family is now campaigning for answers



Before his death, Robert Wilson, 74, told his son: 'Help me they are killing me'



Edna Purnell died in 1998 at age 91

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.

Gosport GP was 'brusque, unfriendly and indifferent'

Lois Rogers

Jane Barton has never directly responded to the claims from at least 120 families that her use of opiates demands an inquiry similar to that into Harold Shipman, the GP in Hyde, Greater Manchester, who was found guilty of killing 15 patients and revealed by a public inquiry to have murdered up to 250 more. He died in prison in 2004.

Barton and her husband Tim own a substantial Georgian house in an affluent enclave of Gosport. The town is otherwise an area of deprivation: many people occupy rundown prefabs erected after the Second World War.

Asked by The Sunday Times in 2002 about his wife's use of life-shortening opiate drugs, Tim Barton replied: "Instead of trying to find a new Harold Shipman, it might be more constructive to ask why a part-time GP was looking after 48 beds. No one has seen any of the letters she sent saying, 'You cannot keep sending me this number of patients, I cannot cope with this number'."

There is no suggestion that Jane Barton is guilty of murder.

The Bartons are believed to have adult children living in Australia and have rarely been seen in Gosport since Jane Barton retired from the NHS in 2010, although she has remained a member of a Royal Navy birdwatching society.

Her background is unlike that of her patients. The daughter of a doctor in Jersey, she and her younger brother Christopher Bulstrode read medicine at Oxford, where her brother is an emeritus professor of orthopaedics.

At a GMC fitness to practice panel in 2010, much of the evidence concerned her "brusque, unfriendly and indifferent" manner, her "intransigence and worrying lack of insight" into the effects of her actions and her "failure to recognise the limits of her professional competence".

The GMC criticised Barton's lack of notes on what treatment had been prescribed and why she had deviated from clinical guidelines limiting the use of a potentially lethal diamorphine/midazolam sedative cocktail of drugs. At one stage, she agreed that she had "handed the nurses the power to start the path for [the patient's] death".

The panel concluded she had "abused her professional position by deliberately withholding appropriate investigation, treatment or referral" but said it was not the GMC's role to punish her.

Two months after the hearing, Barton decided not to continue in practice and has not commented publicly since.



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*