

4th inquiry into GP in hospital deaths case

Police are poised to investigate the doctor who signed 854 death certificates

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A retired GP found responsible for hundreds of deaths at Gosport War Memorial Hospital is facing a new police inquiry, *The Sunday Times* can reveal.

Dr Jane Barton is expected to be told this week that a criminal investigation will be launched after an inquiry found that at least 450 patients died prematurely while under her care, according to sources.

Dubbed Dr Opiate, Barton was said to have presided over a culture where powerful painkillers were routinely and recklessly prescribed. Barton, 71 and still living in Gosport, has always denied any wrongdoing.

Last June the inquiry panel, led by James Jones, the former Bishop of Liverpool, said there had been a "disregard for human life and a culture of shortening



Barton: in charge of wards for elderly

the lives of a large number of patients" at the hospital while Barton worked there between 1988 and 2000.

Three previous investigations into the deaths by Hampshire Constabulary led to no charges being brought. But last July the case was handed to Nick Downing, assistant chief constable and head of serious crime at Kent and Essex police. He has led a review of the evidence and on Tuesday will reveal the result at a meeting with the families of those who died.

Senior sources close to the review claim the decision has been taken to launch a fourth investigation into the deaths in the hope of building a case that can be sent to the Crown Prosecution Service for consideration. In recent months

the police have been taking formal witness statements, which has led to optimism among the victims' families that they might be inching closer to victory in their 20-year fight for justice.

Bridget Reeves, whose 88-year-old grandmother, Elsie Devine, died at the hospital in 1999, said: "No one will be remotely satisfied if the police decide that anything other than a new criminal investigation is being launched."

The Liberal Democrat MP Norman Lamb, who announced the launch of the inquiry panel as care minister in 2014, said it would be an "extraordinary decision" not to push ahead with a new investigation, adding: "Any decision not to launch a formal investigation would be met with incredulity and dismay."

A former senior police officer who led an investigation into the scandal said in January there was "strong" evidence to bring criminal charges in the case.

Steve Watts, who was an assistant chief constable of Hampshire, told BBC1's *Panorama* it was a "big mistake" not to prosecute Barton after his 2002 inquiry into the deaths of 92 patients. She was in charge of prescribing on the wards where the elderly patients died. During her tenure she signed 854 death certificates; 803 deaths involved the administration of opiates through syringe drivers.

Many patients under Barton's care had been transferred from an acute hospital where they had been admitted with a serious illness or for major surgery. Others were under her supervision after a hip operation or a broken shoulder.

Although the former GP has remained tight-lipped, her husband, Tim Barton, issued a statement after the panel reported in June. He said his wife had "always maintained she was a hardworking, dedicated doctor, doing the best for her patients in a very inadequately resourced part of the health service".

After publication of the inquiry's report last year a *Sunday Times* investigation revealed how cheap, faulty syringe drivers may have made Barton's behaviour even more dangerous. Described as "one of the biggest cover-ups" in NHS history, it was revealed that thousands of elderly patients may have died prematurely as a result of the faulty Graseby pump. It is understood the police will tell the families this week that the problem with the syringe drivers should be considered as part of the evidence in the case.