

Doctor may face murder charges over Gosport hospital deaths scandal

Police say fourth inquiry into how 450 patients lost their lives could result in prosecutions

By Martin Evans
CRIME CORRESPONDENT

THE retired doctor at the centre of the Gosport War Memorial Hospital scandal could face murder charges over the deaths of hundreds of patients who were needlessly given powerful opiate painkillers, police have said.

A total of 456 people had their lives cut short and another 200 were "probably" given drugs without medical justification between 1987 and 2001.

An official inquiry last year concluded that Dr Jane Barton, 71, who worked at the hospital between 1988 and 2000, had presided over an "institutionalised regime" that had a flagrant "disregard for human life".

A report revealed how patients who were viewed as a "nuisance" were given opiates via syringe drivers, often resulting in their deaths within days.

Three previous police investigations have failed to bring anyone to justice,

but yesterday senior officers vowed to get to the bottom of the scandal and determine whether the prescribing of the opiates led directly to patient deaths.

Assistant Chief Constable Nick Downing of Kent Police, overseeing the independent investigation, said if causation was proved and suspects identified then "all homicide charges including murder" were on the table.

He said a team of up to 90 officers would focus on 456 deaths between 1987 and 2001, but said the first phase of the inquiry, which would involve taking statements from relatives, could take up to nine months.

It could result in Dr Barton and other senior figures facing a range of charges including murder, manslaughter and corporate manslaughter.

In 2010 the General Medical Council found Dr Barton guilty of serious professional misconduct for failing in her care of 12 patients between 1996 and 1999, but she was not struck off and later retired. The families of those who died welcomed the fresh police investigation but expressed concern that it might be too late to get justice.

Gillian Mackenzie, 85, the first person to go to the police after the death of her mother Gladys Richards in 1998,



Dr Jane Barton, 71, could face murder, manslaughter or corporate manslaughter charges over several deaths at Gosport War Memorial Hospital when she worked there from 1988 to 2000

said justice would not be served until a criminal trial was held.

Bridget Reeves, whose grandmother, Elsie Devine, 88, died at the hospital in 1998, said those involved should face the full range of criminal charges available to police including "murder, manslaughter and corporate manslaughter".

She said: "The failings by the CPS were catastrophic. The Gosport families were deceived and their relatives betrayed, this immoral disaster was perpetuated by a club culture."

Ian Sandford, 75, whose mother Hazel died at the hospital in 1990, aged 80, said: "They should have sorted this out a long time ago."

Charles Farthing, 79, whose stepfather Arthur "Brian" Cunningham died, said there had been a cover-up.

Following the publication of last year's report, Dr Barton insisted she had tried to do her best for the patients.

Speaking outside their home in Hampshire, her husband, Tim, said: "She has always maintained that she was a hard-working, dedicated doctor, doing the best for her patients."

Last night, there was no sign of them at their home. A neighbour suggested they may have gone abroad.

Long fight for justice Twenty-year battle

August 1998 Gladys Richards dies at Gosport War Memorial Hospital. Her family report concerns about her treatment.
1998-2001 Three more families report concerns.
December 2006 Police announce no one will face prosecution

over the deaths.
April 2009 An inquest rules that drugs given to five people at the hospital contributed to their deaths.
March 2010 Dr Jane Barton retires after being found guilty of serious misconduct.
August 2010 The

CPS decides not to prosecute in 10 key cases.
June 20, 2018 An inquiry finds that under a regime with "disregard for human life", 456 people's lives were cut short.
April 30, 2019 Police launch a new criminal investigation.