

Gosport patient deaths inquiry 'buried evidence'

Caroline Wheeler and Gabriel Pogrund

Whitehall investigators have launched an inquiry into allegations of serious misconduct during the official review of the Gosport hospital scandal.

They are examining claims that civil servants working on the £13m inquiry bullied staff, buried evidence and went on taxpayer-funded "working retreats" to Spain.

An independent panel last year linked Dr Jane Barton to the premature deaths of up to 656 elderly people given opiate overdoses at Gosport War Memorial Hospital between 1989 and 2000.

Whistleblowers have alleged that the panel ignored concerns about the hospital's culture and use of faulty medical equipment to deliver a "clean hit" and "draw a line under it all".

The Department of Health said last night: "We take all and any allegations of wrongdoing very seriously. An investigation is being undertaken and it would be inappropriate to comment further until it is concluded."

The Home Office professional standards unit contacted witnesses last month about claims involving two officials who had worked on the panel's inquiry.

The officials are accused of overseeing a "click and move on" approach to evidence, in which

documents were opened so that they would be marked as read and create the impression of rigour – only to be ignored.

The panel is separately accused of a culture of waste. Officials allegedly spent thousands of pounds on hotels during visits to Bristol, York and London. These allegedly included the £1,000-a-night Athenaeum in Mayfair, central London, which boasts a spa and a restaurant with Michelin-starred chefs.

Panel members are also alleged to have gone on taxpayer-funded working retreats to Spain.

The former Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, who chaired the panel, said last year that its work had been comprehensive.

Days later, a health department whistleblower told The Sunday Times that it had ignored key evidence relating to the hospital's use of so-called syringe drivers, which automatically discharged drugs into the bloodstream of patients.

They said Barton's conduct was central but the use of faulty devices by her and her staff should not have been ignored. The use of such equipment, they allege, may help to explain why premature deaths took place under the watch of other staff and after Barton's departure.

@CazJWheeler

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