

705 PA DEATH OF HOSPITAL GIRL, 3, 'POINTS TO POTASSIUM POISONING'

By Dave Higgins, PA

The cause of death of a seriously ill three-year-old girl while she was being treated in hospital was "consistent with potassium poisoning", a pathologist told an inquest today.

Naazish Farooq died in October 1999 at Leeds St James's Hospital where she was being treated for the cancer B-cell lymphoma.

An inquest heard how Naazish was taken ill in September 1999 at her home in the Great Horton area of Bradford.

She was first treated at hospital in Bradford but later transferred to St James's where her condition was diagnosed.

She was undergoing treatment and her condition was improving on October 8 1999 when she suffered a sudden heart attack and died.

According to Muslim tradition Naazish was buried within 24-hours but her body was exhumed when a police investigation was launched following the discovery that she had more than twice the lethal level of potassium in her blood at the time of her death.

Today, Professor Christopher Millroy told a coroner in Leeds that it was not possible for him to ascertain the exact cause of death at a post-mortem examination due to the state of the body after the exhumation.

But given the potassium reading in the blood sample taken in the hospital "the cause of death was consistent with potassium poisoning", he said.

The pathologist added: "I cannot say with certainty, from a pathological point of view, that was the cause of death."

He said potassium was notoriously difficult to pinpoint as a cause of death during post-mortem tests because the body naturally produced the chemical after death.

Under questioning, Professor Millroy agreed that his conclusions were entirely based on the scientific measurement of 18.9 millimoles of potassium per litre of blood in the hospital.

The court heard how the body's normal level is three to five millimoles and that measure of eight is normally considered lethal.

Professor Millroy said: "If that potassium level is correct at that time something has happened to this person's potassium."

"One suggested likelihood is that there's been too much potassium given too quickly."

Consultant toxicologist Alexander Forest told the inquest he was asked by the police to examine whether the bag of dialysis fluid which was being administered to Naazish at the time of her death could have had too much potassium added, or whether it had not been mixed properly.

He said he was not given the exact bag itself and could not comment about whether too much potassium had been added to it by clinical staff.

Professor Forest described how he conducted experiments into the effects of the potassium fluid not being mixed well enough in the dialysis bag.

His experiments showed the bag needed quite vigorous manipulation to make sure the potassium mixed in or it would gather as a layer at the bottom.

If this happened it could mean a large, potentially fatal "slug" of potassium entering the patient's body.

He said it was well known that too much potassium caused heart attacks. It was often the method of choice for doctors who wanted to kill themselves.

Professor Forest said it was also used in the USA as part of lethal injection executions.

He said that lessons needed to be learned about mixing dialysis bags when other chemicals are added to them.

He said he believed the bags should be prepared in advance by pharmacists and not left to doctors and nurses on the ward.

Earlier solicitor Paul Balen, who is representing the Farooq family, told West Yorkshire Coroner David Hinchliff that he believed it was unfair that he was left to represent the relatives while the hospital involved and the number of doctors were all represented by QCs.

The family has fought a legal battle in the High Court to have their legal costs paid by the Government.

Mr Balen said the Department of Constitutional Affairs had only paid "lip service" to this judgment by not allowing enough cash for a top barrister.

Mr Balen said: "I think it shows woeful indifference to this family that the Government made this decision."

The inquest at Leeds Coroner's Court, which is expected to last five days, was continues later today.

mfl 101415 JAN 05

256 PA Later, consultant paediatric oncologist Ian Lewis told the inquest he had been "surprised" when he was told Naazish had died.

He said: "She'd been extremely ill in the course of her illness but things had started to look as though it was improving."

Dr Lewis said he knew the Farooq family because Naazish's sister Shabana died from a similar illness in 1995.

He said he had talked to the family when Naazish had been brought to Leeds but had not had any contact with her in the days leading up to her death because she was being looked after by a different consultant.

But the doctor said he agreed to authorise a more junior doctor to sign her death certificate in the absence of his consultant colleague because he knew the family wanted to bury her quickly.

Dr Lewis also agreed he had "nagging doubts" about the high potassium level but he said doctors at the time believed it was most probably a false reading.

Asked by the coroner if he thought he acted in "indecent haste" by having the death certificate issued he answered: "I don't think it was indecent haste."

"I think there was a clear requirement for families of Muslim origin to try and proceed with the funeral as rapidly as possible for cultural and religious reasons.

"That was my motive for becoming involved."

The coroner has also been told that it was Dr Lewis who raised Naazish's death with West Yorkshire Police as detectives were in the hospital pursuing other matters.

mfl 101550 JAN 05

The inquest was adjourned until tomorrow.

end

212