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ANGER OVER HEALTH OFFICIALS' ROLE IN CHILD DEATH PROBES

By Gary Kelly, PA

Senior health officials were under pressure tonight to stand down from an inquiry into the sudden deaths of three young children in Northern Ireland.

They have been appointed to assist the investigation headed up by John O'Hara QC who confirmed plans to have key witnesses questioned in public.

Senior civil servants Ambrose Owens and Sharon Lindsay were chosen as secretary and deputy secretary to the tribunal which has been asked to have a report by next summer.

Mr Owens is personal secretary to the Department Permanent Secretary Clive Gowdy and Ms Lindsay is personal private secretary to Stormont health minister Angela Smith.

The inquiry will probe the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Adam Strain, Lucy Crawford and Raychel Ferguson while being treated at Northern Ireland hospitals.

Raychel died in June 2001 after receiving a dose of fluids at Altnagelvin Hospital in Londonderry. She was taken to the Royal Victoria Hospital Belfast where she was pronounced dead.

Lucy, 17 months old, died after being given the wrong dosage of fluids at the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh in April 2000. She too was transferred to the Royal Victoria Hospital where she was declared dead.

Adam, four, died after being given fluids during a kidney transplant in the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children in November 1995.

All three were given the wrong fluids at too high a dosage, which caused them to develop hyponatraemia.

It has been alleged all three died needlessly from hyponatraemia, a shortage of sodium in the body, and that the death of one of the children was covered up.

Relatives of two of the children tonight questioned the independence of the inquiry.

Marie Ferguson, mother of Raychel, said they were unhappy that inquiry staff had been appointed by the Health Minister and called on Mr O'Hara to remove them immediately.

"I am concerned that Mr O'Hara is being told that the RUC and the Army are helping run the public inquiry into his murder," she said.

Mrs Ferguson was also concerned that under the terms of reference, legal representatives of the families would not be able to question witnesses.

That would be left to a counsel to the inquiry, who has yet to be appointed.

"We need to know as parents of the dead children that their interests are being represented fully throughout this inquiry, with us being able to raise issues unique to our children's case," she said.

Jay Slavin, the guardian of Adam Strain, shared her concerns and questioned the independence of the inquiry team arguing that the families' legal representatives should be able to question witnesses.

"It is basically a licence to skate over any evidence they don't want, which is very worrying," he said.

The families are due to meet the minister next week and will then take a decision on whether to cooperate with the inquiry.

Mr O'Hara confirmed he met the families earlier today.

The senior barrister who headed up an inquiry into the retention of human organs in Northern Ireland, insisted the inquiry would be fully independent.

"I understand that they are suspicious of many things. I have tried to reassure them this morning as best I can," he said.

"The concern was that documents might be forwarded to this inquiry that might not be handed to me.

"I don't see that as a real risk or a real problem," he added.

He added the Ferguson family had questioned his role as chairman and said the whole inquiry team should come from outside Northern Ireland.

"I set out in the statement why I don't believe I'm compromised or less than independent," he said.

Mrs Ferguson said later that the families would accept Mr O'Hara as chairman.

"We still would have preferred somebody outside Northern Ireland doing it but we feel at this stage we are okay with it," she said.

A police inquiry is currently taking place into the death of Lucy Crawford and may be broadened to include the other two children.

Mr O'Hara accepted there could be a delay in the inquiry given the police investigation taking place.

"I believe I can start the inquiry at least by gathering all the information.

"I will then liaise with the police to find out exactly what they are investigating.

He admitted there could be slippage in the target date for the report to be handed to government.

"It will be difficult to complete by June next year even without any delay as a result of the concurrent police investigation.

Mr O'Hara said the intention was not to have barristers representing the families questioning witnesses at the oral hearings.

But he said he would hold a public meeting to hear arguments about how the inquiry should move forward.

"There will be a counsel to the inquiry who will be appointed in due course and that person will have the responsibility to ask the questions of the witnesses.

"I think it is inevitable that they will present views to me - whether that's fair or not.

"If the families say that is not good enough I will listen to that and may depart from it. That isn't written in stone."

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