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Fourth tot added to deaths inquiry
Hearing opens into tragic hospital fatalities

By Nigel Gould

03 February 2005

A further death is to be investigated by an inquiry set up into the deaths of three Ulster children, it emerged today.

Speaking during the first of a two-day public hearing, chairman John O'Hara said: "At this stage regrettably I have to report that a further death will be added to the list".

He said the death in October 1996 will require "investigation".

The inquiry announced in November is to investigate that the deaths of Lucy Crawford, Raychel Ferguson and Adam Strain could have been avoided.

The inquiry will try to find out if the children died needlessly from hyponatraemia - a shortage of sodium in the body.

The children are alleged to have been given either the wrong food or fluids at too high a dosage which caused them to develop the condition.

Mr O'Hara said today he did not believe there was any reason not to press ahead with the investigation into little Adam's death along with virtually every aspect of Raychel's.

But a question mark hangs over the immediate inquiry investigation into Lucy's death due to a pending police investigation.

Mr O'Hara revealed during the hearing that figures showed that over the last 20 years, there have been eight deaths in Northern Ireland directly related to hyponatraemia.

A total of 55 deaths were recorded where hyponatraemia was the secondary or a contributing factor of death.

He said 16 of these deaths were recorded in 2002/2003.

Earlier Mr O'Hara told the hearing he was "determined to get to the heart of the issue".

He said both families and the public needed to know about this issue.

Mr O'Hara said there could be cross-examination of witnesses at the oral stage of the inquiry.

But he said such a concession could not be abused.

He said the families could engage senior counsel for purposes of the oral hearings.

Mr O'Hara said witness statements would be gathered in May and June with oral hearings proposed for October/November, and he said the net effect of that was that a report would be delayed until February/March next year.

Mr O'Hara told the hearing that to date they had received 80 files of papers from various sources.

He also said that he would have to take into account the cost of the inquiry to the public purse.

And while this was not decisive, it was relevant.

The solicitor for Adam Strain said that he could see no reason why an inquiry could not go ahead into his death.

And counsel for the Crawford family said that the family was mindful of the PSNI investigation into Lucy's death and did not want anything done to prejudice that original investigation.

Meanwhile, solicitors for Raychel Ferguson's family said that they sought the truth "plain and simple".