HER MAJESTY'S CORONER

DISTRICT OF GREATER BELFAST

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Professor J Crane
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11th March 2003

Dear Jack,

HYPONATRAEMIA

Last month I held an inquest into the death of Raychel Ferguson. Later in the month UTV screened a documentary on the death and I am enclosing a video of that. Also I am enclosing a copy of the post-mortem report of Brian Herron and the report of Dr Edward Sumner who prepared an independent expert report for me. The circumstances of the death were drawn to the attention of the Chief Medical Officer and after consultation with Dr Sumner a new protocol was drawn up in relation to the administration of fluids.

An 18 month old baby girl, Lucy Crawford, appears to have died in similar circumstances. To give you the picture I am enclosing a copy of my office note made at the time the death was reported. This shows that inquiries were made by Dr Mike Curtis and subsequently my office was advised that a Death Certificate would be issued giving the cause of death as Gastroenteritis. Subsequently, and without my knowledge, a hospital post-mortem was carried out by Denis O'Hara but unfortunately the findings of this were not drawn to my attention. The evidence suggests that Hyponatraemia played a significant a role in the death of Lucy. I am enclosing a copy of Denis' post-mortem report and the correspondence that has been generated. In retrospect I feel Denis should have drawn his findings to my attention and asked that the post-mortem be made a coroner's post-mortem. Dr Sumner has agreed to prepare a report for me relating to Lucy's death. He states that all the evidence he has seen to date points to classic Hyponatraemia.

My concern is that when deaths of children in particular are reported to my office the proper questions may not be asked. There is now a concern that other Hyponatraemia related deaths may not have been picked up.

I would find it most helpful it we could meet to discuss this issue. During your absence I spoke to Peter Ingram and he said that it would be helpful if I sent across the video of the UTV programme. If you decide to have a "showing" of this I know Brian Herron, Claire Thornton, Dr Miriam McCarthy (of CMO) and Peter Crean would be interested in seeing it also.

In the course of giving evidence at the inquest Dr Sumner described Hyponatraemia as a Cinderella area of medicine throughout the United Kingdom. Those concerned with the care and treatment of Raychel Ferguson in Altnagelvin Hospital appeared to lack knowledge of the condition and the warning signs. The Consultant Surgeon in charge of Raychel said he had never heard of Hyponatraemia until after her death. I am sure that ignorance of signs indicative of the onset of Hyponatraemia is not restricted to Altnagelvin. Lucy Crawford was transferred to the Children's Hospital from the Erne Hospital which perhaps confirms that.

Please let me know what you think. Incidentally, I will be on leave in Kenya until 31st March.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely

J L LECKEY
HM CORONER FOR GREATER BELFAST

PS In a recent issue of the BMJ there was an article on Dysnatraemia in relation to colonoscopy procedures. Hyponatraemia is not restricted to children.

Encs