



HER MAJESTY'S CORONER

DISTRICT OF GREATER BELFAST

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30 January 2004

Dr Michael

INVESTIGATION OF HOSPITAL DEATHS

Last autumn a senior detective expressed concern to me about the present limited role of the police in the investigation of hospital deaths. In particular, concern was expressed at the system that has been in operation for a number of years whereby the Medical Director or Clinical Director of the hospital will arrange to obtain statements from staff involved and forward them to me without the statement makers having been interviewed by a Police Officer. In many instances the individual concerned had consulted their legal adviser prior to making a statement and the legal adviser had input into how it was drafted. It was put to me that this approach did not constitute "best practice" as the Police should interview those concerned as soon after the event as possible and, where necessary, seize medical notes, any relevant equipment and, if the circumstances of the death warranted it, treat an area of the hospital as a potential crime scene. I agreed that in future I would agree to a Police Officer interviewing those involved. The present system would be discontinued. I would anticipate that the Police Officer concerned would call upon you to provide assistance in identifying those involved and seeking their co-operation for interview. That interview may have to take place on the same day as the death.

Subsequently I wrote to the Chief Constable suggesting the need for some form of protocol and consultation with the Medical Directors of the various hospitals.


I was advised that Assistant Chief Constable Sam Kinkaid had been asked to take this forward and earlier this month I met with Detective Chief Inspector Pat Steele on his behalf. The possible way forward that has been suggested is that all hospital deaths reported to me should then be reported to Mr Kinkaid who would designate an Investigating Officer.

On the 20 January 2004 I wrote to the Deputy Chief Medical Officer Dr Ian Carson advising him of the above. I asked if he considered there would be merit in a round table meeting involving Medical Directors, ACC Kinkaid or DCI Steele, himself and myself. Also, I sent him a copy of two draft documents DCI Steele had obtained from ACPO (Association of Chief Police Officer) relating to the investigation of hospital deaths in England and in Wales and a copy of my correspondence with the Chief Constable.

There is no obvious reason to me why similar protocols should not apply in Northern Ireland although, undoubtedly, there would be resource implications, particularly for Police.

I would welcome your views though you may wish to liaise with Dr Carson and your fellow Medical Directors first.

Yours sincerely



J L LECKEY
H M CORONER FOR GREATER BELFAST


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Detective Chief Inspector Pat Steele
Dr Ian Carson Deputy Chief Medical Officer

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