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**Blow to couple's campaign over their daughter's death**

By Lisa Smyth

05 May 2006

An Ulster couple who have fought a long-running battle to include the death of their daughter in an inquiry probing the deaths of three other youngsters were last night dealt a major setback.

Nine-year-old Claire Roberts' family believes her 1996 death should be included in the O'Hara Inquiry, which is examining three hyponatraemia-related deaths in Ulster hospitals.

John O'Hara is leading the inquiry into the cases of Adam Strain, Raychel Ferguson and Lucy Crawford, whose deaths now appear to have been linked to the fluid management regime they received in hospital.

The Coroner for Greater Belfast, John Leckey, yesterday ruled that Claire, from Rochester Road in Belfast, died at the Royal Victoria Hospital for Sick Children as a result of an increase in the water content of the brain.

He said three factors contributed to the condition, including hyponatraemia, or a low concentration of sodium in the blood.

During the three-day inquest, Claire's father, Alan, raised concerns that her sodium levels were allowed to drop so low.

At yesterday's hearing, one of the doctors who cared for Claire, Dr Andrew Sands, said in 1996 it was difficult to book a CT scan for a patient in the children's ward.

Another doctor involved in the treatment of Claire, paediatric consultant Dr Heather Steen, said there is a greater understanding of the condition now, and a patient presenting with symptoms similar to Claire in 2006 would receive different treatment.

Mr Leckey told the inquest he had been asked by Mr and Mrs Roberts to consider reporting Claire's case to Mr O'Hara.

However, Mr Leckey said he would not make a specific recommendation on the matter.

"As the O'Hara Inquiry is already aware of Claire's death I believe that all I need to do is inform him that the inquest has concluded and send him copies of my findings," he said.

A decision to include Claire's case is then up to Mr O'Hara.

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### Inquiry into NI childrens' deaths

An inquiry into the hospital deaths of three children in Northern Ireland will be sent a coroner's report on the death of a nine-year-old girl, an inquest heard today.

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HM Coroner for Greater Belfast John Leckey stopped short of calling for the independent probe to include the case of Claire Roberts.

He told Belfast Coroner's Court such a move would be solely a matter for the inquiry chairman, John O'Hara QC.

Claire was admitted to the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children suffering from symptoms including vomiting and lethargy.

But the schoolgirl's condition, which was linked to a viral illness, deteriorated over a two-day period and she died from swelling of the brain on October 23, 1996.

Claire's family had asked for an inquest to investigate her death as a potential cause of the swelling was hyponatraemia - low sodium levels in the body.

Mr Leckey today ruled hyponatraemia was one of three secondary causes of her death.

The British Government set up an inquiry in November 2004 amid claims three children, Lucy Crawford, Raychel Ferguson and Adam Strain, died needlessly from a sodium shortage.

Last summer the inquiry was asked to suspend its work after police confirmed they will investigate the deaths of Raychel and Adam.

Mr Leckey said: "I have decided that as the O'Hara inquiry are aware of Claire's death all I need to do is notify Mr O'Hara that the inquest has concluded and send him a copy of my findings.

"I will leave it up to him as to whether he takes steps to incorporate Claire's death within the remit set by the Minister for Health."

The inquest heard Claire, of Rochester Road, Belfast, had a history of moderate learning difficulties and epilepsy.

The coroner expressed his sympathies to her family and said the

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passage of almost a decade since her death was unlikely to have eased their anguish.

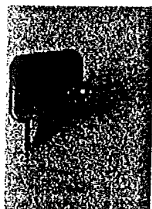
Claire's parents declined to comment after the conclusion of the three-day hearing.

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