

MEDIA BRIEFING NOTES

For immediate release

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Inquest into the Death of Gillian Astbury Media Briefing Notes

Background

The inquest into the death of Grandmother, Gillian Astbury, who died after falling into a diabetic coma at Stafford General Hospital, will begin on Monday 6th September, 2010.

After a fall in her home on 1st April 2007, Mrs Astbury was taken to Stafford General Hospital A&E where a fractured pelvis was diagnosed.

Mrs Astbury, 66, from Hednesford Staffordshire, had been an insulin-dependent diabetic since 1989. Without regular insulin and careful monitoring of her diet, there was a risk that her blood sugar levels could rise to a dangerous level which would ultimately result in a fatal coma.

After suffering a stroke in 2003 Mrs Astbury suffered from some confusion and memory problems and it was deemed in her best interests to receive twice daily home visits from a district nurse to administer her insulin. It was also at this time that a friend, Ron Street, became her full time carer to help her manage her condition.

When Mrs Astbury was initially admitted a diabetic care plan was drawn up by the nursing staff with the help of Ron Street. The care plan detailed the type of food that Mrs Astbury should eat, the times of day her glucose levels were to be checked and the danger levels that would trigger emergency insulin to be administered.

During the time Mrs Astbury remained on ward 7 her diabetic care plan was adhered to. However on the evening of 8th April 2007 Mrs Astbury was transferred to the Orthopaedics and Trauma Ward.

Two days later Mrs Astbury slipped untreated into a diabetic coma with glucose levels so high that they were un-recordable. When Mrs Astbury was found, emergency injections of insulin were administered. Mrs Astbury never regained consciousness and was pronounced dead on 11th April 2007.

Key Issues

The case has raised serious concerns and questions about Stafford General Hospital, its staff and practices.

1. This case has highlighted the systemic failings of Stafford General Hospital inherent from the Board down to the nursing staff. The catalogue of issues surrounding the death of Mrs Astbury include the fundamental lack of communication between nursing staff, the failure to carry out basic handovers and keep accurate notes and records of care, and overriding failure to follow the carefully drawn-up diabetic care plan.
2. The police were brought in to investigate allegations of manslaughter. Whilst there was evidence of failures in the care of Mrs Astbury, there was not sufficient evidence to secure a criminal conviction against any particular members of the nursing staff.
Had the death occurred after 6th April 2008, it may have been possible to bring a corporate manslaughter charge against the hospital. Regrettably, however this law was not in effect at the time of Gillian's death.

3. Unlike other inquests held into the deaths that occurred at Stafford General Hospital around the same time, this is one of the first to be heard by a jury rather than the coroner alone.

Quotes/Comment

Mr Ron Street, Mrs Astbury's carer:

"It has been more than three years since Gill's death at Stafford Hospital, since then an astonishing and shocking number of equally needless and premature deaths have come to light, many of which were not properly investigated.

"At last a public inquiry is being prepared and we hope its progress and ultimate findings will be held to close scrutiny by members of the press and public. Gill's inquest pre-dates the inquiry by approximately a month and, like the inquiry, calls for the issues at Stafford Hospital to be fully investigated in a public forum.

"The years since Gill's death have taken their toll emotionally and our hope now is that the inquest will bring her a chance of justice."

Catherine Beeson, Mrs Astbury's daughter:

"It has been hard waiting for over three years before being able to find out exactly why mum died and hopefully me and my family will get some answers from the inquest and will allow us to finally grieve for our loss."

Sarah Huntbach, Associate Solicitor at Anthony Collins Solicitors:

"It is appalling that Gillian Astbury, whose medical condition and diabetes were well documented, should die of fundamental oversights in her care. Gill's death could have been so easily avoided had basic standards and procedures been adhered to by the hospital.

"It is our belief that the alleged systematic failings that lie at the heart of this case are so great that they should be heard by a jury and not presented to the coroner alone."

Stafford General Hospital

Stafford General Hospital is part of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust. Failings of the hospital first came to light nationally in November 2007 when Stafford resident Julie Bailey started the 'Cure the NHS' campaign after her mother died in Stafford General Hospital.

Shortly after, campaigners marched on the offices of Stafford's labour MP, David Kidney to tell him that vulnerable patients were being neglected on the wards.

In March 2009 Chief Executive Martin Yeates and Chairman Toni Brisby resign just days before the Healthcare Commission report was published.

Inquiries

1. The Healthcare Commission report into the failures at Stafford published in March 2009 revealed "appalling" standards of care and at least 400 excess deaths.
2. In April 2009 the first independent reports, commissioned by the Health Secretary, are published. The outcome was that things were improving, but there were still a lot of problems at the hospital with staffing and equipment.
3. The report into the second independent inquiry was published by Robert Francis, QC in February, 2010. It revealed that the Trust had become driven by targets and cost-cutting and that poor care caused "unimaginable distress and suffering."

4. In June 2010 the Government announced that a public inquiry will be held into the failings at Stafford General Hospital. The final report is expected early 2011.

Inquest

The inquest, which will begin at 10.00am on Monday 6th September, 2010, will be held at the Coroner's Court, County Buildings, Martin Street, Stafford and will run as follows:

Monday 6th September, 2010

Tuesday 7th September, 2010

Its purpose will be to determine the facts surrounding Mrs Astbury's death, not to apportion blame. However the Coroner, Andrew Haigh does have the power to investigate not just the main cause of death, but also the wider circumstances, acts or omissions which directly led to the cause of Mrs Astbury's death; examining in detail key aspects of the case which ask serious questions about the Mid Staffs Foundation Trust.

Further Information

Updates will be posted on Anthony Collins Solicitors website no later than 6pm every day throughout the course of the inquest, www.anthonycollins.com/news-and-events/news.aspx.

It is proposed that a press conference will be held at the conclusion of the inquest, details of which will be posted on www.anthonycollins.com.

Please note that all media enquiries should be directed to the Anthony Collins Press Office and not to the family or Ron Street directly, who have decided to reserve any comment that they wish to make for the press conference.

For further information please contact the Anthony Collins Press Office.

For general enquiries contact Simeon Ling on 07841 499693 or for media enquiries contact Jo Garner on 07717 897991 or 01527 888992, email media@anthonycollins.com.

Anthony Collins Solicitors

Anthony Collins Solicitors is a full service law firm with a national reputation for advising individuals, businesses, not-for-profit organisations, local authorities, and public sector bodies throughout the UK. For nearly four decades, it has been successfully combining market-leading legal expertise with a commitment to excellence and long-term relationships underpinned by a strong ethical position.

Chambers UK, the leading guide to the legal industry, recently praised the firm across its broad range of practice areas, singling out an outstanding 20 leaders in their fields.

Its Clinical Negligence team has also been recognised by members of the legal profession. In particular, the Legal 500 and Chambers UK guides recommend Anthony Collins Solicitors as one of the leading law firms in clinical negligence in the West Midlands.

Sarah Huntbach, Associate Solicitor, is the lead solicitor acting on behalf of the Astbury family. Her profile is available at <http://www.anthonycollins.com/who-we-are/our-people.aspx>.