Welsh hospital scandal ‘bigger than Mid Staffs’

Martyn Halle and Jack Grimston, Published 29th June 2014-06-29

POLICE are mounting what is believed to be the biggest single criminal investigation into the harm and neglect of patients at NHS hospitals.

Detectives have already charged three nurses with allegedly falsifying medical records and the wilful neglect of vulnerable patients. A further 17 nurses at Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board (ABMU) in south Wales have been suspended, of whom at least 10 are under police investigation.

This weekend the judgment of the NHS in England, which gave a job running a Northamptonshire hospital to the chief executive who was in charge of ABMU during much of the period under investigation, was called into question. Richard Baker, a barrister who represented families at the inquiry into the appalling care and high death rates at Mid-Staffordshire NHS Trust, described the ABMU allegations and the number of nurses under investigation as "staggering" and added: "I would say the situation here is more serious than Stafford."

Victims’ relatives have described their loved ones being left in their own urine and soiled bedding and being starved of food and drink. Many are alleged to have been given medicines that had not been prescribed while being deprived of those they needed.

Claims of harm, neglect and death span all age groups and all the hospitals covered by the health board — the Princess of Wales Hospital in Bridgend, Neath Port Talbot Hospital and the Morriston and Singleton hospitals in Swansea.

In one case, a nurse — who was left holding the hand of a patient who bled to death after the doctor she had asked to help allegedly "ran away" — was removed from her agency job at Morriston. The nurse, who is fighting the decision at an employment tribunal, said: "This patient didn't need to die. I repeatedly asked for help and I didn't get it."

Gareth Williams, whose mother Lilian suffered neglect during four admissions to hospitals run by ABMU before her death in 2012, claims the failings went to the top of the Welsh government.

He wrote to Carwyn Jones, the first minister, in 2012 detailing his mother's experiences but claims Jones did nothing but contact the health board which, Williams said, had already failed to act.

It was two years before a limited official inquiry was ordered which upheld many of the allegations of neglect, abuse and falsifying drug charts between 2010 and 2013.

David Sissling, ABMU's then chief executive, went on to head the Welsh NHS and now runs Kettering General Hospital in Northamptonshire. Sissling's spokesman said he wanted to "put historical matters behind him" and did not wish to comment.

Williams and a patients' support group he set up are calling for a public inquiry. Charlotte Leslie, a member of the health select committee who backs the campaign, said: "The Welsh political elite try to dismiss this literally fatal scandal as politics.

"Questions need to be asked about whether it was right to appoint David Sissling to run Kettering after he had presided over a board which failed patients so appallingly."
A spokesman for Jones said: "It is wholly untrue to suggest the concerns raised by Mr Williams were not addressed."

ABMU confirmed that 20 nurses have been suspended since January 2012 but said it was unable to provide further details.