

The longest wait

A COUPLE'S 13-year battle for an inquiry into the blunders that led to the brain damage and subsequent death of their baby daughter has been dealt a blow after NHS England suddenly pulled the plug on a planned investigation.

Elizabeth Dixon, born prematurely in Frimley Park hospital in Surrey, suffered severe brain damage after nurses and doctors ignored, failed to properly record and did not treat dangerously high blood pressure over 15 days – instead giving her medication for a non-existent infection. By the time she was transferred to Great Ormond Street hospital in London, where her blood pressure was eventually reduced, it was too late to prevent brain damage.

Then, while being cared for at home 10 days before her first birthday, Elizabeth suffocated after a newly qualified agency nurse, with no experience of paediatric tracheostomy care, failed to keep her breathing tube clear.

Baby Lizzie's parents, Anne and Graeme Dixon, only learned the real cause of their child's brain damage in October last year when the hospital trust finally agreed to call in an independent expert to review her care. There had been no post-mortem examination and the original cause of death was wrongly certified as neuroblastoma (which in Lizzie's case was a non-life threatening, infantile and often self-rectifying type of cancerous growth), coupled with breathing complications.

Little wonder the parents were unhappy. At that stage they were focusing their concerns on the continuing use of the agency nurse, Joyce Aburime, whose competence to care for a seriously damaged baby they had already questioned. Three years later, 53-year-old Aburime was struck off the nursing register for incompetence, after it emerged that she did not have the experience, training or expertise to manage Lizzie's complex needs.

At that stage, Hampshire police were investigating bringing criminal charges of gross negligence manslaughter against the nurse, and also a case of fraud against her agency, Primecare. Police had also discovered discrepancies in both the drugs and dosages Lizzie should have had that night. But the Crown Prosecution Service later abandoned the case, deciding it could not prove beyond reasonable doubt that the baby's condition may also have been a factor in her death.

The family was confident that matters would be fully explored at the inquest, which finally took place in 2009. Although the coroner did decide that asphyxia from the blocked tube was the main cause of death, he left the neuroblastoma as a secondary cause – and ruled out gross neglect as a factor. But the family, concerned about anomalies in testimony, records and notes, continued to investigate and became increasingly suspicious of Lizzie's treatment and diagnosis immediately after birth. Incredibly, at one stage Mrs Dixon was even arrested and held for 10 hours by the police for "harassment" as she sought help from the family's former police liaison officer. (The Hampshire force eventually expressed its "regret" for her distress and settled her civil claim for wrongful arrest and imprisonment in February this year.)

Finally, thanks to the family's persistence, last year Frimley Park Hospital Trust commissioned the independent review by Dr Malcolm Coulthard, a leading consultant paediatric nephrologist. His report was damning. He found that although the neuroblastoma was

non-life threatening, it had caused excessive levels of adrenal hormones, which pushed up the baby's blood pressure to a damaging level. He concluded: "Opportunities to make the diagnosis were missed throughout her 15-day stay."

Within hours of her birth, a consultant decided to monitor her blood pressure every four hours to check the significance of a slightly raised initial reading, and a nursing care plan to monitor the blood pressure was drawn up. But this was not carried out. On day four, her "extremely high BP" was recorded but not acted upon. Thereafter, Dr Coulthard said: "She developed puzzling symptoms and signs which led to several otherwise apparently thorough reviews of her case, but nobody measured her BP again until day 12. At that point, her high BP was noted, and the term 'hypertension' began to be used, but she was still not treated for it."

He concluded that in the absence of any other identifiable cause it was "overwhelmingly likely that Lizzie's ill health was caused by uncontrolled severe hypertension, and that this caused her brain damage. Her brain damage resulted in a greatly impaired quality of life... and ultimately her death."

Following the report the hospital apologised for Lizzie's poor care and the family was promised an independent investigation commissioned by the Care Quality Commission and NHS England. But now NHS England has pulled out and, with the CQC having no power to investigate individual cases, the watchdog has said it will only carry out a "thematic review", which will identify wider lessons for the NHS from Lizzie's case.

Mr and Mrs Dixon are devastated by the news – which Mrs Dixon says again denies them the truth. Only one nurse has been made accountable for what was clearly a series of mistakes throughout Lizzie's short life.

So the family battles on. The next objective is to get the original narrative verdict quashed and a new inquest ordered, which will investigate all the evidence. Without it or an open inquiry, the Dixons will remain convinced there has been a massive cover-up.



FirstPort in a storm



SCANDAL-PRONE property management company Peverel (*Eyes passim ad nauseam*) has decided that one way to clean up its reputation is to rebrand itself – as FirstPort.

Last week it announced that all its property services, including OM Property Management, Peverel Retirement and Solitaire Property Management, will come under the new "customer-focused" brand. Peverel, once a key component of the Tchenguiz Family Trust – which owns 1 per cent of all residential freeholds in the country – was rescued from administration in 2012 by venture capitalists Electra and Chamonix. But it has rarely been out of the news.

The firm has been criticised in parliament, the press and by the Campaign Against Retirement Leasehold Exploitation; and it has lost a string of property tribunal cases over issues such as building insurance and other sneaky commissions. And then, as *Eye* readers are aware, its subsidiary Cirrus was found guilty last December by the defunct Office of Fair Trading of running a £1.4m price-fixing scam over electronic door entry systems at retirement sites.

Peverel has been dumped from all its prime London sites, with developers Berkeley and Barratt no longer using the company. These include fancy sites along the river such as St George's Wharf in Vauxhall – home to John Major and Chelsea Clinton – where residents received £1m compensation because of excessive service charges (paid by Berkeley to avoid reputational damage). Retirement builder McCarthy and Stone, which once used the company to manage its retirement blocks, has also severed links.

After near collapse in 2011 following the arrest of the Tchenguiz brothers as part of a Serious Fraud Office investigation, Peverel's revival was funded by a £25m RBS loan secured against newly issued leases on resident house managers' flats at retirement complexes. But this too is now being questioned by Sir Peter Bottomley, the MP who has been championing the rights of retired leaseholders in the Commons.

FirstPort may turn out to be LastResort for the troubled management company.

WOODLAND PRIVATISATION

Dis-lodged

LUXURY eco-lodge firm Forest Holidays has withdrawn its planning application for 70 deluxe timber cabins amid the trees in Fineshade Woods in Northamptonshire. The plans had attracted public criticism from locals as well as major wildlife charities and government-funded environment schemes (see *Eye* 1373).

Originally a joint venture between the Forestry Commission and the Camping and Caravanning Club, Forest Holidays is now majority owned by Lloyds Development Capital (LDC), although it is still 20 per cent owned by the Forestry Commission. According to the Forestry Commission itself, Fineshade Wood is an ancient mixed broadleaf and conifer woodland.

The Woodland Trust, which is sponsored by Forest Holidays, told the *Eye* that the plans were being withdrawn after it raised objections to the scheme behind the scenes rather than through the planning process. It pointed out to the firm that the plans for Fineshade would have had "a negative impact on the ancient woodland".

In a lengthy response to *Eye* 1373 pointing

out the Woodland Trust's absence from the list of official planning objectors, PR manager Steve Marsh said the funding arrangement



gave the charity "some positive influence" over the developments. He promised that it would terminate the arrangement straight away should Forest Holidays push ahead with destroying ancient woodland.

The withdrawal of these plans is unlikely to be the end of the story at Fineshade, or many other sites where Forest Holidays has expansion in mind. A presentation updating the board of Forestry Commissioners on Forest Holidays earlier this year described their future plans as, "Building up development pipeline. Plenty of scope for growth."

Meanwhile, campaigners at Save Our Woods, who helped to fend off the government's plans for privatisation of the national forest estate in 2011, have launched a petition calling on the communities secretary Eric Pickles to make all planning applications for large developments inside the national forests subject to independent environmental impact assessments. "Forest Holidays appear to be being given carte blanche to take possession of public forests and convert them into a private business," they said.