Shipman found dead in prison cell

Owen Dyer *London*

Harold Shipman, one of history's most prolific medical murderers, was found dead in his cell on Tuesday, after apparently hanging himself with bed-sheets attached to the bars of his window.

Shipman was serving multiple life sentences for murdering 15 women patients while working as a general practitioner in Hyde, Greater Manchester. An inquiry into his case by appeal court judge Dame Janet Smith later found that he had killed at least 215 patients, and possibly as many as 260.

He had just entered the fourth year of his imprisonment, and would have turned 58 this week. On his conviction, trial judge Mr Justice Forbes had told him: "Your crimes are so heinous that in your case life must mean life."

The Prison Service issued the following statement: "We can confirm the death of Harold Shipman at HMP Wakefield this morning. Mr Shipman was found hanging in his cell at 6.20 am, and despite the best efforts of staff, who immediately attempted resuscitation, he was pronounced dead by a doctor at 8.10 am."

Prisons minister Paul Goggins said that in view of the public concern about this case, an investigation will be led by the new prisons and probation ombudsman, Stephen Shaw. It had been intended that Mr Shaw would take up his duties in April.

Shipman was on suicide watch at HMP Manchester early in his sentence and again after being moved to HMP Frankland in February 2000, but his recent behaviour had given no cause

for alarm. Last month, however, he was stripped of his privileges at Wakefield for general non-compliance with staff. The television in his cell was removed, and he had to wear prison uniform instead of casual clothes. He had regained some privileges, however, before his death.

Danny Mellor, whose mother Winifred, aged 73, was one of the Shipman's last victims, said he was "bloody angry that Shipman has taken the coward's way out."

"I've always harboured a secret desire to confront him, though I know it would never have been allowed," said Mr Mellor. "Now we'll never know why he did it."

A spokeswoman for the ongoing Shipman inquiry said: "The death is a matter for others such as the Prison Service. The news does not affect the work of

the inquiry." She said phase II of the inquiry would go ahead as planned and submit its report this summer. □

See www.the-shipman-inquiry.org.uk

Harold Shipman: accused of taking "the coward's way out"

WHO confirms avian flu outbreak in Hanoi

Jane Parry *Hong Kong*

The World Health Organization has reported that there are three confirmed cases of H5N1 avian influenza in Hanoi, Vietnam, after samples from five patients were sent to Japan and Hong Kong for testing. This comes at the same time as an outbreak of H5N1 avian flu in the poultry population in southern Vietnam, which has killed at least 40 000 birds and led to the culling of 30 000 more. A WHO epidemiologist and infection control expert, Dr Philippe Calain, has arrived in Vietnam to help trace the source of the confirmed human cases.

Since October 2003 there have been 14 cases of severe respiratory disease in and around Hanoi, 12 of whom have died.

All but one of the cases are children. One of those who died was the 30 year old mother of one of the children who had died. Both mother and child are among the confirmed cases of H5N1. It is not yet known whether the other 11 cases of severe respiratory disease are also caused by H5N1 avian flu or whether more samples are being tested at the National Influenza Centre in Hong Kong and Japan's National Institute for Infectious Diseases.

The most likely source of infection seems to be poultry. "The poultry outbreak in southern Vietnam is very far from Hanoi, and there have been no official reports of an avian flu outbreak in Hanoi, but four out

of five families [in which children had died] interviewed reported chickens dropping dead," said Peter Cordingley, WHO's spokesman in Manila.

There is no evidence at this stage of human to human transmission, and none of the health-care workers treating the patients have become sick. The fact that most of the infections occurred in children is significant, added Cordingley. "We think that they may have become infected by playing in yards where chickens are also kept and have come into contact with infected faeces," he said.

WHO is very concerned about the outbreak—in particular, the risk of human to human transmission. "We are principally worried about the possibility that the avian virus could acquire full capability to transmit from one person to another," said Dr Shigeru Omi, WHO's regional director for the Western Pacific.

"The ensuing virus would be highly pathogenic and transmissible. This is why WHO and the Vietnamese authorities are treating this matter seriously."

There have been major outbreaks of H5N1 avian flu in South Korea, where more than a million chickens and ducks died or were slaughtered last year, and Japan confirmed its first outbreak on 12 January. No human infection has been reported in either country.

So far there has not been a repeat of the H5N1 avian flu outbreak in Hong Kong that caused six deaths and led to the mass slaughter of more than one million chickens in late 1997 and early 1998. The Hong Kong government announced on 13 January that it would ban imports of poultry from Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam and that all poultry imported from China would be vaccinated against the virus from 15 January onwards. □