

WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE NI ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH

**UPDATE ON EXPERT REVIEW OF RECORDS OF DECEASED PATIENTS
OF DR WATT, 4 NOVEMBER 2021**

Further to your request on behalf of the Committee for Health, I am pleased to provide you with an update on the progress on The Expert Review of Records of Deceased Patients of Dr Watt (2008-2018). This update builds further upon that previously provided to this Committee on 8 June 2021.

The Committee has previously been advised that the first phase (Phase 1) involved significant preparatory work, including the development of a legal framework, to allow RQIA to access the clinical records of the deceased patients of Dr Watt. Phase 1 was completed, with the legal framework being formally adopted by the Chief Executives of the relevant health and social care (HSC) bodies in November 2020.

Given the significant number of deceased patients who died during the period covered by this Review (2008-2018), RQIA has agreed with the Department of Health to take a phased approach to the Review. This statement therefore focuses on Phase 2 of the Review, which is currently in progress.

As we have previously indicated, an Expert Review Panel of experienced consultants, from outside of Northern Ireland, has been formally engaged through The Royal College of Physicians (RCP) to conduct the review of records of the deceased patients of Dr Watt selected for Phase 2 of the Review.

The work was commissioned in two parts. Two Proposals for work are being undertaken by the RCP; Proposal 1 covers the group of 29 deceased patients whose families have made contact with RQIA; Proposal 2 covers the group of 16 patients who were included in the Belfast Trust's Cohort 1 live recall but unfortunately died before either attending or completing their re-assessment.

As part of their work, the expert panel has committed to consider information shared by families of the deceased patients, after they have reviewed the medical records.

In April 2021, we approached the 29 families whose deceased relatives are covered by Proposal 1, to offer the opportunity to find out more about the Review and to become involved if they wished to do so.

The response was as follows:

- 13 families opted to meet in person with the Family Liaison Team¹
- 10 families opted to engage via telephone, zoom, email and/or by post;
- 4 families opted to have no further contact with the review; and despite best efforts
- 2 families did not respond.

We also wrote to the GP's of the 16 patients covered by Proposal 2, in an effort to make contact with their next of kin. This resulted in a response from only 1 family who opted to meet in person with the Family Liaison Team, 1 family who engaged initially via letter and thereafter via telephone and email, and 1 family who advised they did not wish to be involved with the review.

A total of 25 families opted to engage with RQIA's Family Liaison Team; all expressed a wish to have their concerns regarding the care and treatment provided to their relative by Dr Watt considered by the expert panel. The Family Liaison Team therefore continued to engage with these families over the summer months to assist them, and finalise the content of individual Family Information Forms to their satisfaction, in preparation for review by the expert panel.

The records to be reviewed include clinical records, GP records, death certificates, coronial reports (where applicable), records regarding those patients treated by Dr Watt in the independent sector (where applicable) and information extracted from the Northern Ireland Electronic Care Record (NIECR) system.

The records, which were obtained from Health & Social Care source organisations, were then digitised, redacted, quality checked, indexed and uploaded to a secure electronic location, to enable remote review by the expert panel. A specific team of 5 digitisation officers were employed for various periods from March to August 2021, to undertake this work and an RQIA officer undertook quality assurance and oversight of the project management of this important piece of work. In total, over 190 volumes of patient records amounting to approximately 67,000 individual pages were processed, redacted and quality checked.

In August 2021 Dr Watt's legal team provided RQIA with copies of records pertaining to those patients within Phase 2 of the Review who had been treated by Dr Watt in the independent sector, thus enabling the digitisation team to finalise their work of preparing the records for review.

The patient records were made available to the expert panel in August, who then began the work of reviewing these. It is expected that the work of the expert panel in conducting the review of the records will have completed at the end of October 2021. The RCP have given an undertaking to provide RQIA with an interim summary of findings soon after, anticipated to be by the end of November.

¹ The Family Liaison Team comprises RQIA review team staff supplemented by experienced clinicians including a clinical psychologist and consultant medical doctor. These professionals were identified specifically to support this work because of their skills and experience in engagement with families on sensitive issues. In addition to the face to face meetings which took place with some families, the team also supported a help-line and a dedicated email address. A range of information and materials were also developed by the Family Liaison Team for the families and for the website. These included frequently asked questions, a bereavement support leaflet and information leaflet about the review.

This summary will be shared with the Department of Health and inform discussions regarding future phases of this work. RCP have also indicated to us that a further period of time will be required to undertake the sensitive work of producing individual patient summary reports for each of the 45 deceased patients, to be provided to those families who wish to receive this. It is currently expected these would be available around April 2022.

The committee is asked to appreciate that these timelines outline our best estimates and that those families with whom we have been engaging will be advised of expected timescales on a continued basis.

We are extremely mindful that our contact with the families could prove painful and might further impact on their grief and sorrow. RQIA gave significant thought to how to engage in the most compassionate way possible. We offered a range of methods including email, an online form, telephone interviews, or a face to face meeting with our Family Liaison Team which would take place in a neutral venue.

RQIA has been proactive in providing support to families, and has identified a number of organisations who can offer support. We also established a contract with *Inspire Wellbeing*² to support family members with independent counselling, should this be required. To date, we are aware of 5 individual family members having availed of this support.

In keeping with an approach of no surprises, the Family Liaison Team continue to be in regular contact with each of the families who have engaged with us to provide them with updates on expected timescales for the reports and individual case summaries, as these become clearer. The families will be offered a range of options for receiving information regarding the findings and the case summaries of their loved ones.

It is noteworthy that as of 29 October, a further 9 families have made contact with RQIA, expressing concerns regarding the care and treatment provided to their deceased relatives by Dr Watt, and wishing to have their records expertly reviewed in future. Several of these contacts are recent, having arrived after the BBC Spotlight programme aired on 29 September 2021, and after the media coverage regarding Dr Watt having been granted voluntary erasure from the GMC register. Following these events we have reached out to the families involved in Phase 2 of the Review to answer any questions they may have had and to provide reassurance of our commitment to this important work.

As previously highlighted, a large number of deceased patients have been identified as potentially falling within the scope of the Review. Work is ongoing to ascertain the accuracy and completeness of the list that we were provided with, in order that we can better estimate the number of patients on the list who can be confirmed as being under the care of Dr Watt at some point in their lives. We continue to liaise with representatives from HSCB and BSO who have expertise in this field of work, as we await future directions from the Department of Health. The experience we have gained from Phase 2 has reinforced to us the critical importance of such high profile and sensitive work being thoroughly planned and fully resourced.

² RQIA has commissioned Inspire Wellbeing to provide an independent and confidential counselling service for family members who have been affected by this Review. Inspire provides those who avail of the service with a private space to discuss their thoughts and feelings around the Review and how it has impacted on them, by talking with an experienced counsellor, skilled in psychological support. The support offered by Inspire is entirely separate to the Review process, and none of the information family members discuss or share with their counsellor is shared back with RQIA.

RQIA will, in partnership with the Department of Health, continue to give careful consideration to these matters and as such, all future decisions regarding this work will include learning emerging from the work on Phase 2.

In addition, conscious of the sensitive nature of this Review and the significant public interest, RQIA continues to regularly provide updated information on our website.

Briege Donaghy
Chief Executive