

PRESS RELEASE

Issue date: 4th October 2010

Oral hearings begin in C. diff Inquiry.

The hearing of oral evidence by the C.diff Public Inquiry Panel began today at Antrim's Civic Centre and is expected to run for 14 days in October.

In her opening address the Inquiry Chairman, Dame Deirdre Hine explained that the Inquiry's purpose is to establish fact and experience and is not an inquiry as to fault:

"Our process will be essentially fair, inquisitorial and not adversarial in nature. Our overall objective is to contribute to restoring and increasing the confidence of the communities served by the Trust in the safety, effectiveness and sensitivity of the services provided, especially in the care of frail and vulnerable members of the community."

"We intend that our review of the number of deaths in which *C.difficile* was either the underlying or contributory cause should provide publicly accessible information on the nature of these infections. The aim will be to increase understanding of the relative risk infections pose in hospital care and to challenge unnecessary or exaggerated apprehensions.

"Similarly, by listening to patients, relatives and staff affected by the outbreak and drawing on their experiences, we hope to contribute to an understanding of the impact of hospital acquired infections and point to changes and improvements in which these can be lessened or ameliorated."

Dame Deirdre offered the condolences of the Inquiry to those whose family members or friends who died during the period of the outbreak:

"We are aware and are sorry that the Inquiry itself may have reopened stressful and distressing memories for many of those directly affected whether patients relatives or staff."

Dame Deirdre paid tribute to the cooperation she and the Panel had received from all those who were approached for help.

To date almost 200 people have contributed to the Inquiry's work including bereaved families, former patients and their relatives, as well as Trust staff. So far almost 100 people have provided witness statements and over 50 people are being invited to provide oral evidence to the Inquiry.

Experts have also been called to address key themes identified by the Inquiry Panel. These include: C.diff infection; infection control practice; care of the dying; communication with patients and relatives; staff support in healthcare organisations and communications with the media.

The Panel will hear oral evidence from patients, relatives of patients, and staff from the Northern Trust about their experiences. The Inquiry Panel will also hear evidence from expert witnesses as well as receive evidence from medical assessors who reviewed the case records of patients who died within 90 days of the diagnosis of C.diff.

Ends

For further media information and media registration please contact Maria McCann at McCann Public Relations on 028 9066 6322 or 07802 934246 email: maria@mccannpr.com

Note to editors:

- The issues the Inquiry has been asked to address are firstly, to establish how many deaths occurred in Northern Health and Social Care Trust hospitals during the outbreak, for which Clostridium difficile was the underlying cause of death, or was a condition contributing to death. Secondly, what were the experiences of patients and others who were directly affected by the outbreak of Clostridium difficile infection that occurred in Northern

Health and Social Care Trust hospitals between 16 June 2007 and 31 August 2008.

- The hospitals involved during the outbreak, which took place between 16 June 2007 and 31 August 2008, were Antrim, Braid Valley, Mid Ulster, Moyle and Whiteabbey.
- At the time the C.diff infection levels were identified as an “outbreak” as the levels of infection had exceeded the normal baseline rates.

Oral hearings:

- During the first week of oral hearings the Panel will hear evidence on the first of the terms of reference. This will include the report of the three medical reviewers who have examined the case records of the patients who were diagnosed within the period of the outbreak and died within three months thereafter and those whose death certificates recorded C difficile. In the first week evidence will also be heard on the second term of reference– the experiences of those directly affected by the outbreak- and the hearings will continue over subsequent weeks.
- Those directly affected were the patients who contracted C. diff during the period of the outbreak, the relatives including the relatives of patients who died and the staff of the Trust who were involved in caring for the patients. The Panel will hear their description of their experiences from a number of witnesses drawn from each of these three groups.
- In addition the Panel will hear from one of the expert reviewers regarding the evidence that emerged during the review of the case notes that sheds some light on the quality of the care given to the patients who subsequently died.
- There will be evidence from expert witnesses who are authoritative on the areas of witness experience that have emerged as major themes for the Inquiry. These include communication between healthcare staff and patients and their relatives, relationships within hospitals, between hospitals and the public including the media, and the care of patients close to death.
- The Inquiry is non-adversarial .The Chairman has appointed Mr Frank O’Donoghue QC as Counsel to the Inquiry and he will be posing questions to

witnesses giving oral evidence. He has consulted with the majority of those witnesses. Legal representatives of all core participants have already been invited to submit suggested questions to be posed for consideration by Inquiry Counsel. The Chairman has decided that given the remit of the Inquiry, representation by additional Senior Counsel is not required.

- The Inquiry Panel will provide information on all evidence provided to it throughout the oral hearings on its web site www.cdifquiry.org.

The Inquiry can be contacted by calling Kate McClements on 028 9051 7124 or email: inquiry@cdifquiry.org.