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PRESS RELEASE

WESTERN HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES COUNCIL CALLS FOR PUBLIC INQUIRY

Following last night's Western Health and Social Services Council's monthly meeting, the independent Watchdog Body's Chairman Paddy McGowan issued the following statement:

Mr McGowan said "All of our members viewed the Insight Programme, 'When Hospitals Kill'. Our first thoughts were with the families and how deeply tragic it is that three families' lives have been blighted by the events leading to the deaths of their young children. Two of these children; Lucy Crawford and Raychel Ferguson came from and received medical care in our area. We would want to again offer our sincere condolences to all of the families referred to in the programme".

He stated, "We are deeply concerned about the medical and care issues raised in the programme and the very disturbing allegations that there was a 'cover-up'".

He went on to remind members that both the Chief Officer Maggie Reilly and himself, met with Mr Hugh Mills, the Chief Executive of Sperrin Lakeland Trust, his Chairman Mr Harry Mullan and Dr Diana Cody the current Acting Medical Director back in June 2004. He said, "we met to discuss the reasons why the Western Health and Social

Services Council had declined the invitation to participate in the Trust's internal review of the events leading to the death of Lucy Crawford".

"Our main concerns and objections at that time", he said, "centred around, what was in our opinion the very narrow focus of the review, the absence of independent medical expertise and the fact that there was a lack of openness and transparency in the review process. We clearly stated at that time that we would be more confident if the Trust and the Department had instigated a full and independent review of all of the issues relating to the death of Lucy Crawford and the subsequent handling of the parents right to know what had happened to their daughter. We concluded that meeting by saying that as an independent body concerned with matters of public interest that we would reserve the right to comment publicly on the outcome of their completed review".

"Since we tabled the Insight Programme as an agenda item events have overtaken us with the announcement by the Health Minister Angela Smith of the setting up of an independent inquiry, led by Mr John O'Hara QC, into the issues raised by Insight and to investigate the allegations made in the programme".

"We welcome the intervention of the Minister as an important first step. We would also want to acknowledge the sensitivity shown by the Minister in informing the families concerned of her intentions before making a public announcement. However as of today we do not know how this inquiry will be taken forward either in it's scope or terms of reference".

"As a body charged with representing the public interest in health matters and in listening to and reflecting public concern we would strongly urge the Minister to ensure that the scope of the inquiry is sufficiently wide to encompass all of the issues raised both by ourselves and the Insight Programme".

"These families", he said, "live with an enduring burden of grief and powerlessness which neither time nor compensation could eradicate. We can only guess at the terrible effects that these untimely deaths have had on the families".

"This inquiry therefore must be open and transparent, it must be bound by a time frame which is reasonable in which to work and reach conclusions. It must be able to call on all of the key people involved in the care of the children and all others who had a responsibility to protect these and future children in the planning and delivery of care".

"To that end we call on the Minister to make this a full public independent inquiry and in light of the families' concerns we would further call upon the Minister to appoint an independent Chair from outside the jurisdiction".

"The families must have the right to be heard not only as witnesses but also in the shaping of this inquiry. They must be supported to participate in a way that is meaningful to them".

"The public whose confidence has been severely dented must observe a process which restores that lost confidence and fully addresses the apparent lack of accountability in the Health Service".

Mr McGowan concluded by saying that, "the outcome of this inquiry one can only hope will give some relief to the families in the knowledge that whilst nothing will ever return their children to them, that the lessons learnt and changes implemented will mean that no other family should ever have to go through this again".

ENDS

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NOTE TO EDITORS

The Chairman or Chief Officer can be contacted at 028 82252555