

Mother may win new hearing into headache death

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A mother's claim that a hospital failed to provide suitable experts for a coroner to determine the cause of her daughter's death could lead to a second inquest.

The attorney-general has acknowledged in a letter to the mother of Gaia Young that although the facts of the case did not suggest that NHS officials had been in contempt of court they "may amount to a reason to seek a fresh inquest".

The dispute centres on the circumstances of the death of Young, 25, the daughter of the late Labour peer Lord Young of Dartington and half-sister of the writer and broadcaster Toby Young. She died at University College Hospital, London, in 2021 after being admitted for a sudden headache and vomiting, having spent the day cycling.

At her inquest in February [2022] the coroner gave a narrative ruling, stating that "a missed chance" by doctors when she arrived at the hospital led to her death, concluding that the cause of death was unclear.

Her mother, Lady Young, has argued that doctors misread her daughter's condition and failed to treat her appropriately as she deteriorated. Young told the inquest that the hospital sent a doctor to the hearing to give evidence who was insufficiently skilled to assist the coroner, and that the hospital had more suitably qualified experts available.

She has written to Victoria Prentis KC, the attorney-general, asking her to investigate the hospital for possible contempt of court for not following a court order. Prentis replied stating that the facts did not amount to a contempt of court, but “may amount to a reason to seek a fresh inquest”. She suggested that Young seek legal advice or raise the matter with the coroner.

In the letter, seen by The Times, Young said a court had ordered the hospital to “ensure the attendance at the inquest of such medical witness or witnesses to give oral evidence as are best able to assist [the coroner] with the likely cause of the deceased’s cerebral oedema and thus her death”.

Lady Young believes that her daughter died from a metabolic encephalopathy — a brain injury — and asked for a neurological specialist to attend the inquest. She said the expert who attended was “not appropriately qualified or experienced” and that the inquest “was uninformed and uninformative: a waste of time and money”.

She added that shortly after the inquest, hospital officials suggested that metabolic encephalopathy was the cause of her daughter’s death. A hospital spokesman said that last year the trust “agreed to commission a range of independent experts, including a neurologist, to explore further the circumstances surrounding Gaia’s death. We are committed to learning from external opinion and scrutiny, and we agreed with Lady Young that she would approve the scope of the reviews and the experts involved before we proceed.

“We have written to Lady Young on several occasions to request her feedback. We are yet to receive this but believe the external reviews are important for Gaia’s family, and our learning, so we urge Lady Young to engage with us.”

