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NHS trust accused of cover-up is refusing to release report into deaths

Ambulance service allegedly kept information about patients that died hidden from coroner

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An ambulance trust accused of hiding information from a coroner about patients that died is keeping a damning internal report about the deaths secret, the Guardian can reveal. A consultant paramedic implicated in the alleged cover-ups continues to be involved in decisions to keep the report from the public.

Earlier this month, **North East Ambulance Service (NEAS)** apologised to relatives after a review into claims it **covered up errors by paramedics and withheld evidence from the local coroner** about the deceased patients. But a bereaved family left in the dark about mistakes made before their daughter's death have rejected the apology.

Now, it has emerged that a 2020 internal interim report on the alleged cover-up continues to be kept secret by the trust. The damning report by consultants AuditOne has been leaked to the Guardian after **first being exposed by the Sunday Times**. But the trust continues to refuse to release it under the Freedom of Information Act (FoI), citing "personal identifiable information" as the reason for not making it public.

Paul Aitken-Fell, a consultant paramedic blamed in the report for amending information sent to the coroner and removing crucial passages about mistakes by the trust's paramedics, remains in post. He also holds the gatekeeper role of FoI review officer, and as such has endorsed decisions to refuse to release the report to members of the public who ask for it.

Explaining the decision to keep the interim report under wraps after a review in May, Aitken-Fell said the report "contains person identifiable

information that is subject to an exemption” under the FoI Act. He wrote: “We also believe that disclosure would be likely to prevent future reviews being taking place with an honesty and candour needed to ensure that corrections can be made to improve our services.”



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The trust is accused of covering up details of its treatment of Quinn Milburn-Beadle, pictured, who took her own life. Photograph: North News/NNP/North News & Pictures Ltd nort

In 2019, an internal investigation by the trust into the death of 17-year-old Quinn Milburn-Beadle, who killed herself, established that the first paramedic on the scene failed to perform CPR even though her heart was still beating at the time. But this mistake was hidden from the coroner and Quinn’s family.

The leaked AuditOne report on the incident says a passage in the trust’s investigation about electrocardiogram (ECG) activity from Quinn’s heart lasting for 16 seconds was removed by Aitken-Fell. He also changed a passage on procedures not being applied correctly to state that the “correct decision” was made.

The AuditOne report said the “amendments removed a critical fact and changed the conclusions so dramatically that it did not reflect the findings within the report”.

Quinn’s father, David Beadle, said: “We’re surprised, disappointed and angry that he [Aitken-Fell] is still employed by the trust.

“When he was called as a witness at the second inquest into Quinn’s death, he said it was quite routine to change reports. It is ironic that he is the freedom of information review officer. He’s not going to release documents that implicate him.”

After the alleged cover-up was exposed, the coroner accused NEAS of trying to turn information from “black into white”.

The trust’s chief executive, Helen Ray, told Quinn’s family in November 2019 that the trust “now notify the coroner proactively”. But more allegations of cover-ups of information to the coroner over other deaths subsequently emerged.

After this month’s independent review into alleged cover-ups involving four deaths, including Quinn’s, Ray said she was sorry “for any distress caused to the families” by past mistakes. The review did not reach a conclusion on whether changes to the evidence for the coroner were made deliberately to cover up paramedics’ mistakes.

Beadle said: “It’s too little, too late. Until everything has been investigated fully and there’s no stone left unturned, we feel an apology from the trust just isn’t worth it.”

He dismissed this month’s report by Dame Marianne Griffith, the former chief executive of University Hospitals Sussex, as a “whitewash”. He said: “It doesn’t actually tell us anything new that we didn’t already know. And it feels like the **NHS** marking its own homework.

“We just want some accountability and, ideally, some heads to roll. Some people whose loved ones have died didn’t know that ambulance service covered any up or hid information from coroners. We want justice and this report hasn’t given us that.”

Paul Calvert, the trust’s former coroner’s officer who lost his job after blowing the whistle about the alleged cover-up, said: “The fact Aitken-Fell is still a clinical practitioner is abhorrent. He seems to have complete impunity afforded to him by those who are meant to keep people safe. The lack of accountability is nothing short of a disgrace.

“The fact that the NEAS have facilitated his role as information review officer, given his involvement in the scandal, is further evidence of the trust’s corruption and blatant disregard for patient safety and duty of candour.”

A spokesperson for the trust said: “It would not be appropriate for us to comment on an individual’s employment, however, the independent review

included all the relevant information from the AuditOne report and we have acted upon all the resulting recommendations.”

They added: “The final report from AuditOne in June 2020, which includes their findings and recommendations, has been published under FoI. All the relevant information was also included in the independent review. The draft version of the AuditOne report from March 2020 contains personal information and information protected by legal privilege, which are exempted under FoI.”

Aitken-Fell has been approached for comment.