

Investigation into cause of Islington teen Gaia Young's death

10 June 2023

Exclusive by Charles Thomson Investigations Reporter

An NHS trust will launch a series of further investigations into a young woman's sudden death.

Gaia Young, 25, was rushed to University College London Hospital in July 2021 with chronic pain in her head.

Her death four days later was eventually attributed to a cerebral oedema (swelling of the brain).

But her mother, Lady Dorit Young, said important questions were never answered at Gaia's inquest, including what had caused her brain to suddenly swell.

She described her experience since her daughter's sudden illness as "like a nightmare train running over me".

Dorit said she asked St Pancras Coroner's Service to arrange for a neurologist to give expert evidence at the inquest, but the request was ignored.

"The coroner allowed the hospital to choose its own witnesses, which is a breach of natural justice," she complained.

But UCLH (University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust) will now try to answer Dorit's outstanding questions.

"We have agreed to commission a range of independent experts, including a neurologist, to explore further the circumstances surrounding Gaia's death," a spokesperson said.

"We have invited Gaia's mother to agree the details of the external reviews so that we can proceed."

"Death Sentence"?

Gaia, from Islington, was a former student at Camden School for Girls and spent a lot of time with her friends at Hampstead Heath.

In-between her job with a software company, she was a competitive ballroom dancer, a keen painter and loved to cycle.

She was considering a cycling holiday and had been on a bike ride on the day she fell ill.

Gaia excused herself from the table during dinner with her mother and friends, complaining of a bad headache.

It got progressively worse and she began vomiting.

She was rushed to UCLH by ambulance.

"The junior doctor there thought she was intoxicated because she was acting strangely," said Dorit.

“She had hallucinations. She seemed to reach out for things that didn’t exist. She was repeating sentences.”

Dorit said she had since spoken to a doctor who said such assumptions were not uncommon and can be “a death sentence”.

“The doctor said that to assume intoxication is a killer of young people,” she said.

“You must never assume intoxication without proof, but it is happening to young people every weekend.”

Missed Opportunities?

Coroner Mary Hassell recorded a narrative conclusion at Gaia’s 2022 inquest.

She said one possible cause of her oedema was low sodium levels, in which case, “more monitoring and better clinical management would have afforded her a better chance of survival”.

The coroner also noted that “a CT scan was not conducted as it should have been immediately following her admission to hospital”.

Had that scan been done, Mrs Hassell wrote, it could have “changed the clinical management”.

Dorit said this meant Gaia’s the pressure caused by the brain swelling was not discovered soon enough to save her life.

“If they had done the CT scan earlier, there would have been time to consult neurology,” she said.

“Knowing of the intracranial pressure would have resulted in head-up nursing, transfer to intensive care and potential intubation,” wrote Mrs Hassell.

Unanswered Questions

But while the inquest uncovered possible missed opportunities to save Gaia’s life, the actual cause of her oedema was “unclear”, Mrs Hallett wrote.

Dorit believes this question have been answered if a neurologist had been called to court, as she had requested.

“I’m looking for the truth,” said Dorit. “My daughter was a very fine girl. She would have done what I am doing.

“I’m incredibly angry with the system. I’ve never been in a situation like this before. If you would have told me five years ago that this is how things are handled, I just wouldn’t have believed you.”

NHS Response

“We understand that this continues to be an extremely difficult time for Gaia’s mother and loved ones and offer our deepest sympathies,” said UCLH.

“While the coroner could not say that different care could have prevented Gaia’s death, we do acknowledge some things could have been done better.

“We have already developed new clinical guidance and training following our internal investigation and we are committed to understanding what further lessons can be learned.”

Coroners are prevented by the judicial code from answering media enquiries about individual cases.