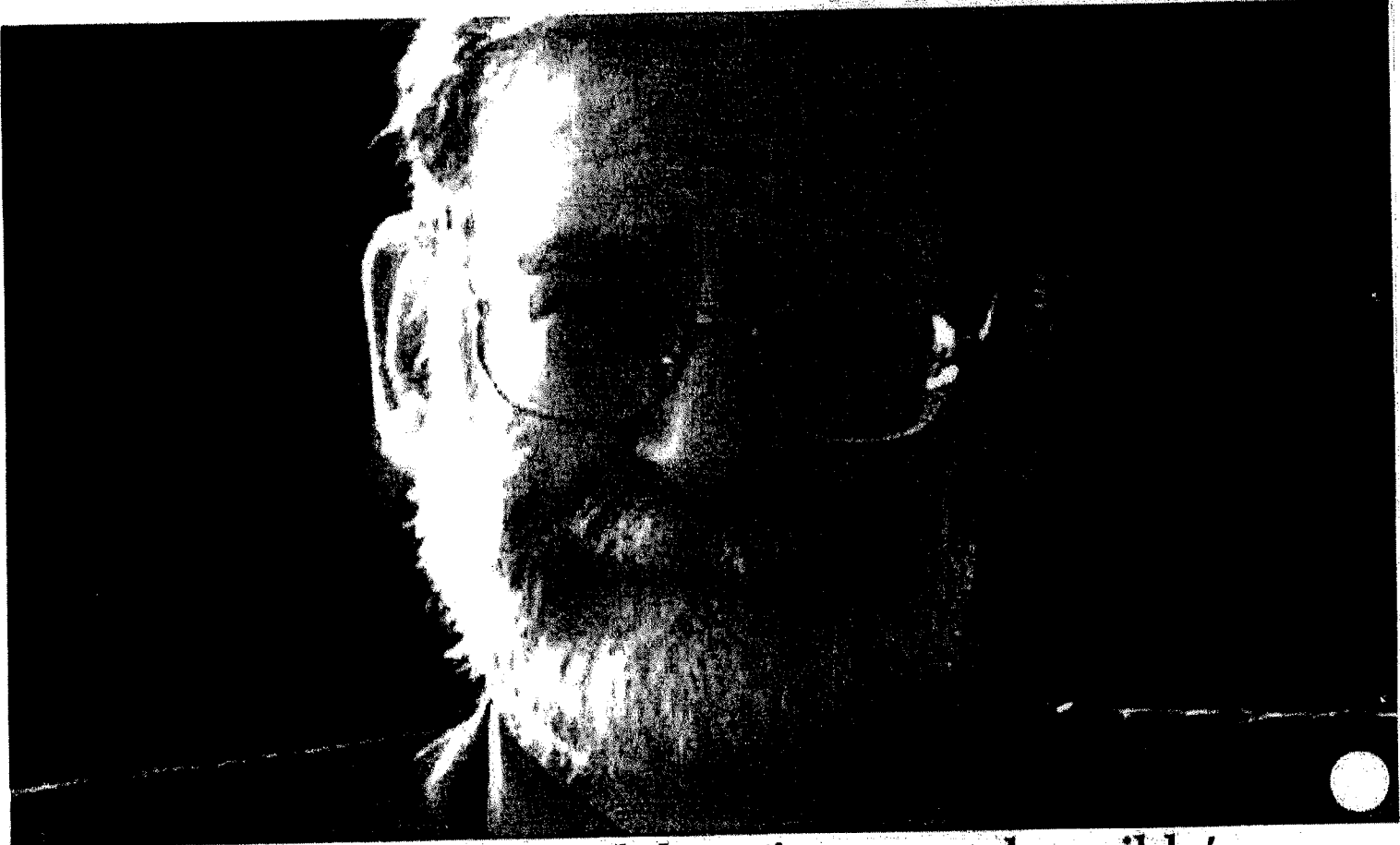


# The Guardian



## Death certificate reform delays 'incomprehensible'

Royal College of Pathologists president Dr Suzy Lishman says changes to system for recording deaths are long overdue

*Press Association*

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A senior pathologist has criticised the lack of reform to the death certificate system 15 years after the conviction of serial killer Dr Harold Shipman.

Dr Suzy Lishman, president of the Royal College of Pathologists, said changes to the system for recording deaths in England and Wales were long overdue and it was incomprehensible they had not happened.

Family doctor Shipman covered his tracks by signing the death certificates of his victims himself, avoiding the involvement of a coroner.

Chris Bird, whose mother, Violet, was murdered by Shipman, said the delay in implementing the changes was "criminal".

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Lishman said changes that would see a medical examiner review death certificates had not been implemented, possibly because of confusion created by the coalition government's NHS shakeup.

She told BBC Radio 4's Today programme: "I think it appears that the introduction of medical examiners may have got lost in the NHS reforms. Primary care trusts, for example, were initially meant to employ medical examiners and they were abolished in the latest reconfiguration.

"I know there were also concerns about funding mechanisms, but medical examiners in the pilot schemes have been shown to save money so this shouldn't really be an obstacle."

Lishman said in the pilot areas it cost less to pay a medical examiner to scrutinise all deaths than it cost for the cremation form system that relatives pay for following a bereavement.

"It also saves money because the pilot schemes found there is much less litigation," she added. "If bereaved relatives get the answers that they need around the time of death, if all their questions are answered then, then they don't feel the need to sue the NHS to get the answers they deserve."

She said the legislation had been passed, and Prof Peter Furness was in place as the interim chief medical examiner "sitting there waiting to take on this role".

Bird told Today: "Dr Lishman said in her statement today this was 'incomprehensible'. It's not, it is criminal. There is government stalling on implementing something like this that can save millions of lives."

Shipman, who died in 2004, was jailed for life in 2000 for murdering 15 patients using the drug diamorphine while working in Hyde, Greater Manchester.

An official report later concluded he killed between 215 and 260 people over a 23-year period.

A Department of Health spokesman said: "We are committed to reforming the system of death certification. We now have working models of the medical examiner service in Sheffield and Gloucester and will be working to review how they fit with other developments on patient safety. The reforms will proceed in light of that review."

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