

How could



ORDEAL: Dad Avtar Sidhu with Simon, Solomon, Christina and Helen

Picture: DAVID HARTLEY

they let mum die?

BRAVE FAMILY'S GRIEF AFTER A SERIES OF BLUNDERS BY HOSPITAL ENDS IN TRAGEDY

HE can remember it as though it were yesterday. The moment Avtar Sidhu had to tell his children their beloved mother was dead will stay with him for ever.

"They just stared at me in shock," says father-of-seven Avtar, wiping away a tear. "Pauline was everything to them and she was devoted to them. Her death has destroyed our family."

The pain has been even harder to bear because it has taken four years to receive an explanation for why Pauline, 42, had gone into hospital for treatment of a simple gynaecological condition and yet died 40 hours later.

Problems began when her operation at the John Radcliffe Hospital, in Oxford, was unaccountably postponed.

Then, despite a month of pain and an agonising overnight stay, when she was finally admitted for the op, she was left unattended for eight hours. A vital blood delivery also went missing and, as Pauline's condition dramatically worsened, panicking nurses couldn't contact the doctors needed to save her.

"Since then, we've fought to find the truth in the hope that no other family suffers in this way," says engineer Avtar, who was married for 26 years.

Now, the Oxford Radcliffe Hospital NHS Trust has finally agreed to pay compensation, though the amount has yet to be finalised. The decision has brought everything flooding back for Avtar.

"Initially, Pauline hadn't been sick, she just had a minor growth," he recalls. She had been referred to the gynaecological department of the Radcliffe in November 2000, after finding a lump in her stomach.

But her first appointment was not until three months later, when she had a scan that showed she had a fibroid disease of the uterus.

Care assistant Pauline was given a date for a hysterectomy in June 2001 but the op was cancelled and put back a month.

"They never gave any reason," says Avtar, 63. "By that time, Pauline was in a lot of pain."

In fact, she spent her daughter Hannah's 15th birthday curled up in agony.

The following day, June 25, Pauline was admitted to hospital and given morphine. But she was sent home

the next day. Then just under a week later, Pauline was once again rushed to hospital. "It was midnight and Pauline was screaming," Avtar recalls. "The emergency doctor said that she was bleeding internally and a scan at the hospital confirmed it."

"The first major error was that Pauline was put on the wrong ward. It meant that she was left unseen for eight hours – even though the doctors knew she was bleeding internally."

At around 8pm, Avtar left the hospital to

fall. They started CPR and I was ushered away. I was in tears and just kept calling: 'Mum, Mum!'"

Avtar arrived minutes later. "By this time, there were loads of doctors around Pauline," he says. "But it was too late. Within half an hour, they told us that she'd died. Leila and I were both screaming."

Father and daughter had to return home and tell the rest of the family the heart-breaking news. Avtar says: "Hannah wouldn't

month, they stayed home and mourned Pauline. "We didn't really know what had gone wrong. And that made it even harder to accept," says Avtar. "I did my best for the kids but I couldn't be everything to them. It was especially hard for the girls – they missed their mum desperately."

Christina was so upset that a few months after the tragedy, she started to self-harm in an attempt "to be with Mummy". She was given counselling but nothing could make up for the loss of her mother.

"Pauline was always at home for them," explains Avtar. "I started working part-time so I could bring the kids up right but I'd see their sadness. They couldn't make sense of it."

The hospital couldn't offer any explanation for Pauline's death and an inquest at the Oxford Coroner's Court, in October 2003, failed to answer many of the family's questions. It recorded a ruling of "death by natural causes contributed to by system neglect".

"The hospital, and the lack of care she received, was responsible for Pauline's death," Avtar says.

"Why was my wife dead when she had something so harmless? Why did the doctors leave her from 10am till 6pm? And why was her operation put back in the first place? I had to get to the truth."

THE family spent thousands on legal fees and employing medical experts, who discovered the truth about the missing blood delivery and believed that had she been given treatment between 9.25pm and 9.50pm, when the doctors' beepers failed to work, Pauline would have survived.

Finally, last month the Trust apologised and made its offer of compensation. An ORH spokesman says: "We have apologised to the family and offered our condolences to them again."

"That's all very well," says Avtar. "But we want to know if the Trust has changed the beepers and its system of care – to make sure this doesn't happen again. At least then we could take something positive away."

"Yes, the Trust has apologised – although it has taken four years – but it doesn't change what happened to my wife. We all depended on Pauline, she was our world."

United in their grief, the kids have managed to pull together and Avtar is sure his wife would have been pleased with the success they've made in their schooling and various careers.

"Pauline was a great mum and I know that, if she were here now, she would be so proud."

BY AMANDA REVELL WALTON



SO CLOSE: Pauline (inset) and above with five of her kids and husband Avtar

go back to the family home in Didcot, Oxon, for a few ours. His eldest daughter, Leila, a police officer, stayed with Pauline.

"All of a sudden, Mum slumped back and went pale and sweaty," she says. "I ran out and got the nurses. When I came back, Mum had started having a fit and her eyes had rolled back."

"They hooked her up to machines but her blood pressure kept going down. The nurses were panicking and started bleeping the doctors on call but no one responded. The head nurse was saying: 'I don't know why they aren't coming!'"

It was later revealed that the doctors' beepers weren't working that day – another crucial lapse. Leila, 28, recalls: "After about 25 minutes, a doctor from another ward finally arrived – then Mum's heart started to



believe me – her mum had told her that everything would be all right. It was all so heartbreaking."

The days leading up to the funeral were a living nightmare and at the service, Avtar insisted on an open casket, so he and the kids could say their last goodbyes.

"We touched her face and then that was it, she was gone."

The family – Simon, 30, Leila, 28, Solomon, 22, Helen, 20, Hannah, 19, Christina, 14, and 15-year-old John – were in shock. For a

My wife Pauline just had a fibroid but she ended up dying on the ward