

Cholesterol drug link to disturbed teacher's death

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A CORONER has linked a cholesterol-lowering drug prescribed to millions to the death of a senior master at a top independent school.

Allan Woolley, a housemaster at University College school in Hampstead, north London, died last April when he stood in front of a train. He had had "psychic disturbances" after taking statins.

Woolley had complained of blackouts and insomnia after taking a simvastatin produced by Merck Sharp & Dohme (MSD). Simvastatins are a form of statin, which lower levels of cholesterol and other lipids, or fats, in the blood.

Last week Dr Andrew Walker, the deputy coroner for Hornsey, directed the jury to cite the drug simvastatin in their verdict on the inquest. "Following legal argument I have decided that this is not a case where you can return a suicide verdict. You must not say that Allan Woolley killed himself . . . or that he took his own life. You must include that the drug simvastatin was involved."

Woolley's doctor is now entitled to write to the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency to notify it about the side effects of the drug.

About 3.4m Britons take statins to cut the risk of heart attack and stroke, of whom 1m are on Zocor, the brand of simvastatin taken by Woolley. The market is worth almost £1 billion a year.

Woolley's friends and family say that the teacher's death at North Wembley train station in London was completely out of character. In a written statement Woolley's sister Lorraine Bubb said: "I understand that in the days leading to his death my brother had had nightmares which were so terrible he could not distinguish between them and real life."

Woolley, 52, who lived on his own, was described by his headmaster as "immensely popular and inspirational". He had taught at the school for 27 years, leading the school's Ten Tors expeditions to

Dartmoor for most of that period, and was in charge of cross-country running.

When questioned at the inquest Dr Fredric Steinberg, a physician employed by MSD, said psychic disturbances were among the “rare” and “low-occurrence” side effects of simvastatins. But he added: “It could be depression; it could be hallucination; it could be anxiety.”

A spokesman for MSD said the company was not aware of the “detailed specifics of the underlying health condition” of Woolley. “However, our sympathies go out to his family.”