

For Immediate Release

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Family call for public inquiry into death in police custody

The family of Christopher Alder are calling on the Home Secretary David Blunkett to hold a public inquiry into his death. Tonight at 9pm BBC1 will show the programme, *'Death on Camera'* which contains the video evidence of his death on the floor of the custody suite in Queens Gardens Police Station in Hull on 1st April 1998. Following seven weeks of evidence the jury at the inquest into his death returned a verdict on 24th August 2000 of unlawful killing and said that the death was due to 'positional asphyxia'.

The chilling video of the last eleven minutes of Christopher Alder's life has only been seen at the inquest and the trial of the police officers involved.

Since 1990 INQUEST's monitoring has revealed how a disproportionate number of black people and those from minority ethnic groups have died as a result of restraint or serious neglect. It is the emergence of statistical information backed by factual accounts about the circumstances of the death that has been crucial to understanding the influence of racism on the treatment of black people in custody.

INQUEST have been working with Janet Alder, Christopher's sister and her lawyers since shortly after his death. Helen Shaw, Co-Director said:

"This shocking evidence of a young black man dying on the floor of the custody suite of a police station and the subsequent failures during the investigations into his death demonstrate the need for a public inquiry. Such an inquiry should address the issues raised by his death in the context of all contentious deaths in custody and their investigation. The Home Secretary must act to ensure that such an appalling incident never happens again, and to make certain that those responsible for such deaths are held fully to account. Janet Alder and other members of the family continue to struggle, six years after Christopher's death, for truth and accountability against a backdrop of failure after failure by the criminal justice system. "

Background:

Christopher Alder, a 37 year old black man who was a former paratrooper decorated for service in Northern Ireland, died on 1st April 1998 after being arrested and taken to Queen's Gardens Police Station, Hull. He was arrested at Hull Royal Infirmary where he had been taken after a fight outside a nightclub. He was taken in a police van to the station. He was supported into the custody suite and after 13 minutes police officers called an ambulance. However despite resuscitation attempts Mr Alder died.

From video evidence shown to the jury it was demonstrated that he died after being left unconscious face down on the floor of Queen's Gardens Police Station Custody Suite for 11 minutes. His trousers were around his knees, he had been doubly incontinent and blood formed a pool around his mouth. Apart from removing the handcuffs when he was initially brought into the police station the four police officers present in the custody suite did not touch Mr Alder in the 11 minutes he lay dying on the floor despite his condition. Rattles of his breath were also clearly heard on the video.

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The jury heard that Mr Alder had been involved in an altercation outside The Waterfront nightclub during which he had been hit in the mouth and had fallen to the floor. He was taken to Hull Royal Infirmary where he was seen by a doctor. Mr Alder was confused and uncooperative at the hospital and was unable to be treated. Police officers dragged him from the premises. Both inside the hospital and outside the police drew a CS Spray canister and threatened to use it on him. Once outside Mr Alder complained that he wanted to return to see the doctors. According to police officers he was still being abusive and they warned him that if he did not leave he would be arrested. He refused to leave and was arrested for breach of the peace and handcuffed behind his back. Mr Alder was then put into the back of a police van and conveyed to the police station.

On arrival at the police station evidence was heard that he was found motionless in the police van. The video then showed him being dragged into the police station custody suite and placed face down on the floor. Officers were heard to speculate that he was faking illness.

Failure after failure occurred in the police investigation held under the supervision of the Police Complaints Authority. The death was never treated as potential homicide and the custody suite never sealed and preserved as a scene of crime. Crucial blood staining was wiped from the custody area and van. No proper enquiry was ever made as to why Christopher's trousers were around his knees with mud on them and on his thighs. The clothes of the police officers who had been involved with him were not the subject of any examination report and sent for dry cleaning. The clothes, and tooth, of Christopher Alder himself were destroyed.

Five police officers were suspended from duty and after the inquest there was a subsequent trial for manslaughter. Having listened to submissions at the end of the Prosecution case, the Judge at Teesside directed on 21st June 2002 that the police officers could not safely be convicted on the evidence on either count that they faced, and the Jury must therefore enter not guilty verdicts. As a consequence the officers have never answered any questions about the incident, exercising their right not to incriminate themselves under the Coroners Rules at the inquest and because of the failure of the prosecution.