

# Britain: police to challenge verdict in killing of black detainee

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Five policemen are challenging a jury verdict that they unlawfully killed a prisoner. The verdict was brought against them at an inquest in August. The jury at Hull Crown Court heard how the officers laughed and joked while the black father of two lay dying on the floor.

Christopher Alder, 37, was arrested on 1 April 1998, and died at Queens Gardens police station in Hull, East Yorkshire, without regaining consciousness. Alder, a former paratrooper, died in police custody with his hands cuffed and his trousers around his knees.

Alder's sister, Janet, called the decision to challenge the inquest verdict "absolutely disgusting." She added, "It shows once again the disrespect for Christopher's right to life".

The incident that led the death of Alder began on the night of March 31, 1998. A dispute arose at the Waterfront nightclub in Hull. Alder became involved in an argument, which continued outside the club in the early hours of the morning.

A man who intervened hit Alder in the face, who fell back onto the pavement hitting his head. He was then taken to Hull hospital. Staff there refused to x-ray him, alleging he was "extremely troublesome". Later he was arrested for breach of the peace and put into a police van. During the five-minute journey he collapsed and was dragged into the station.

The seven-week inquest, which is believed to be the longest of its kind, heard evidence that Alder died with his hands strapped behind his back and his trousers around his knees. Video film was shown to the court of police officers laughing and joking while Alder lay in a pool of his own blood.

For twelve crucial minutes police officers refused to administer first aid, which would have likely saved his life. The video shows that not a single police officer

lifted a finger to help Alder, even when he could be heard quite clearly on the tape gurgling through a pool of blood and vomit.

To justify their officers' non-intervention, police Sergeant Dunn said he thought Alder was making excessive snoring noises to frighten officers. He said, "I felt that the floor was the safest place for him. He was laid down with face to the side. I thought he was blowing through blood to try and upset us". In fact, the only time the police officers looked at Alder was to empty his pockets. The arresting officer, PC Nigel Dawson, could be heard telling a sergeant, "He is as right as rain. This is just a show. He has just got a simple haematoma [blood bruise]".

Nathaniel Carey, a Home Office pathologist, said that Alder could have been saved by early treatment "The cause of death was positional asphyxiation due to inhalation of the stomach contents. A significant contribution to the cause of death was the position he was placed in and the inhalation of vomit".

The unlawful killing verdict has led to renewed calls for an independent inquiry into the growing number of deaths in police custody. Following the inquest, Alder's sister said, "Justice has been done at last, but it has taken 28 months to get to the only true verdict which could have been given. I want to thank the jury and send them my compliments and let's hope now we get a proper prosecution". The solicitor acting for the Alder family believes that the Crown Prosecution Service should be looking at charges of gross negligence or manslaughter against the officers concerned.

From day one the police and state authorities have sought to prevent any one being found guilty of the killing. The police tried to ensure that no evidence would survive. Alder's clothing was destroyed before any forensic examination was made and the police

officers involved had their uniforms cleaned. They then started spreading unsubstantiated rumours about Alder's mental state and that he was involved with drugs.

At the inquest, Hull Coroner Geoffrey Saul instructed the jury that no evidence existed showing "what happened that night had anything to do with the colour of Christopher's skin." Saul told the jury that there was no video evidence suggesting an assault had been carried out by the officers. Despite pressure to bring in a lesser verdict, the jury reached the decision that Alder had been unlawfully killed.

Last year more than one person a week died in police custody in Britain—65 people—an increase from 53 the previous year. Over the past four years, the numbers dying in police custody have increased by 41 percent.

Since taking office, the Labour Government has been hostile to any major changes in the way complaints against the police are investigated. It has allowed the police to continue carrying out all investigations of complaints them through the internal Police Complaints Authority and has sought to prevent public disclosure of evidence relating to deaths in custody.



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