

Alzheimer's sufferer died in handcuffs at UK immigrant detention centre

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Last year, an 84-year-old man with Alzheimer's disease died in handcuffs in a British immigration centre.

An official report has described such events as "shocking cases where a sense of humanity was lost." Nick Hardwick, Chief Inspector of Prisons, published his report after an unannounced visit to the Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre near Heathrow airport. He noted that most detainees were handcuffed on escort. Further, he said, they were "needlessly handcuffed in an excessive and unacceptable manner," leading to the death of the detainee.

Alois Dvorzac, an 84-year-old Canadian of Slovenian origin, was refused entry to the UK at Gatwick Airport on 23 January 2013 and detained at a detention centre. Doctors reported he had Alzheimer's disease. They marked him "UNFIT for detention or deportation," recommending social care.

The on-site immigration team also expressed concerns to the caseworker, who failed to respond to the report on time. He had to be pursued twice before he replied on 5 February, acknowledging the man's vulnerability and lack of contacts in the UK. The following day an attempt to remove Dvorzac was abandoned after a doctor declared him unfit to fly. Dvorzac was returned to the centre.

He was taken to hospital in handcuffs on 8 February, going back to the centre before a return visit to hospital two days later. He had been in handcuffs for approximately five hours, the report noted, and was still wearing them, when he died.

Under 2001 detention centre rules, Rule 35 allows for release if medical staff identify a detainee as a victim of torture or as suffering from affected health. Staff report to Home Office officials who decide whether to release the detainee. Despite strong medical recommendations, the response of the Home Office allowed the continued detention of Alois Dvorzac. They bear responsibility for his death.

Hardwick referred to another case where a detainee assessed as low risk, in a wheelchair following a stroke, was handcuffed on a journey to hospital "for no obvious reason." Hardwick noted "other cases where use of handcuffs was grossly excessive." In November 2012 a dying man "remained handcuffed while sedated and undergoing an angioplasty procedure in hospital; his restraints had only been removed seven hours before his death." The Home Office's professional standards unit had completed a critical investigation report into this case.

Hardwick noted that Dvorzac, "who was considered frail and was suffering from dementia, died while still in handcuffs, having been kept in them for around five hours. Only after his heart had stopped and cardiopulmonary resuscitation started were the handcuffs removed." This case is being investigated by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman.

Harmondsworth, which can accommodate 661 male detainees, is run by private company GEO. America's second biggest prisons contractor also runs Dungavel Immigration Removal Centre in South Lanarkshire.

Every year around 30,000 asylum-seekers are detained in Britain, nearly one-third of them women and children. They are isolated from the outside world. Only one visitor is allowed. They are confined, without time limit, until their asylum case is heard. If their appeal is rejected they are deported immediately without regard for their safety.

The British government has 12 immigration removal centres run by private contractors on behalf of the UK Border Agency. Some are designed for short-stay detention. Detainees' welfare is not covered in health care and legal aid.

Hardwick's report complains that insufficient weight is given to doctors' opinions on fitness for detention. During his inspection a doctor declared four detainees, including three refusing food, unfit for detention. There were 34 health care complaints in 2013 about

appointment delays and medication issues.

As existing cuts to legal aid take effect, and new proposals are implemented, obtaining legal advice will become harder. The proposed residence test, requiring that individuals applying for legal aid must be “lawfully resident” for the previous 12 months, excludes those seeking asylum. Those who have been refused asylum will find access to legal aid even more difficult, and it will be harder to challenge detention or abuse.

Legal aid is denied many detainees. Legal representatives report difficulties in booking visits, and long waits for detainees to be brought to the visits corridor. The removal of detainees is mental and physical torture. At one point, the report noted, there were seven escorts and two medical escorts in the room, “resulting in detainees being surrounded in a cramped environment, which unnecessarily exacerbated tensions.”

A reserves system is employed, with some detainees being taken to the airport not knowing if they are to be removed. They only fly if another detainee is taken off a flight at the last minute. Hardwick called this system “unacceptable.”

In 40 age-dispute cases, children were being kept in centres until their age was assessed. Not all the cases had undergone the appropriate age assessment, the report noted, and the Home Office did not always deal with cases speedily. The time taken for social services to undertake assessments was “sometimes excessive.”

In 2013, the Refugee Council secured the release of 36 young people in detention who had been wrongly assessed to be adults. Six others were released into local authority care pending a new age assessment. Of those released, 12 were under 16. Two were under 15. The charity suspects there are “more cases of children being wrongly detained going unreported and unchallenged.”

Innocent people have been locked up for more than a year. Harmondsworth produces a monthly report for the Independent Monitoring Board showing accumulated length of detention for those held longest. Hardwick noted that the centre “did not hold up-to-date figures for all detainees.” A report before his inspection showed 11 detainees had been held for over a year—2 percent of the population. At the previous inspection, 10 percent of the population had been held for more than a year. The longest-detained had been held for more than two-and-a-half years.

These conditions are not unique, as a report into Yarl’s Wood Immigration Removal Centre by Women for Refugee Women (WRW) highlights. Yarl’s Wood holds

more than 400 women. WRW talked to 46 women who had sought asylum and been detained. Nearly three-quarters of them had been raped, while 41 percent had been tortured. More than half said they had been persecuted for being a woman, while 18 percent had been persecuted for their sexuality.

The women had flown to the UK to seek asylum and start new lives, only to face more persecution under the name of controlling immigration. “I was tortured in my country of origin and now I am getting a second torture by the UK Border Agency,” said one Zimbabwean woman.

Half the women reported verbal abuse from staff. Forty women said they had been guarded by male staff, and 70 percent said this made them uncomfortable. Three women reported physical assault, and one reported sexual assault. All were unhappy, with 93 percent feeling depressed, 83 percent lonely and 85 percent scared. Nearly two-thirds (61 percent) reported suicidal thoughts. The web site No-Deportation reports 1,367 attempted suicides and over 10,751 persons on suicide watch in the British detention system between 2007 and 2013.

The women reported serious health problems and poor health care. Over one-third had mental health problems including psychosis, post-traumatic stress disorder and flashbacks. Thirty percent were on suicide watch, and 22 percent said they had tried to kill themselves.

Asylum applications have fallen in recent years, from 80,315 in 2000 to 21,785 in 2012, but the numbers held in detention are growing, and the trend is upwards.



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