

“Nerve agent” death of Dawn Sturgess raises fresh questions over UK Skripal affair

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The tragic death of Amesbury resident Dawn Sturgess has raised questions surrounding the Skripal/ “novichok” poisoning events in the UK to a new pitch.

Sturgess, along with Charlie Rowley, was admitted to Salisbury District Hospital last Saturday after falling severely ill at Rowley’s home. Initially assumed to have been caused by a contaminated batch of heroin or crack cocaine, the pair’s illness was declared on Wednesday to be the result of “novichok” nerve agent poisoning. On Sunday night, it was announced that Sturgess had died of a massive heart attack and that Rowley remains in a critical condition.

In marked contrast to the hospitalisation of Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, in March—when British authorities cordoned off whole sections of Salisbury and immediately led international condemnation of Russia—the events involving Sturgess and Rowley have met with a more muted response.

Prime Minister Theresa May issued a statement reading, “Police and security officials are working urgently to establish the facts of this incident, which is now being investigated as a murder.” Home Secretary Sajid Javid echoed “This has now become a murder investigation and police and security officials are working around the clock to establish the full facts of the incident.” Only hours before it was announced that Sturgess had died, Javid said the UK would not “jump to conclusions” about Russian involvement and was not immediately contemplating further sanctions.

However, Javid has demanded Russia provide an explanation for what happened and accused it of using the UK as a “dumping ground for poison.” Meanwhile, Security minister Ben Wallace said, “The working assumption would be these are victims of the consequences of the previous attack [against the Skripals].”

If the two events are connected, as government officials

assert, and if they continue to insist that the first was a Russian assassination attempt, then Sturgess’ death would amount to the killing of a UK citizen through the actions of a foreign power. By their own logic, the government and media ought to be screaming from the rooftops.

The fact that they are not suggests that the British ruling class have not yet got their story together. Compared to the succession of untenable explanations and accusations thrown out over the Skripals, it indicates a desire to more carefully control what information does emerge.

Like the Skripal case, however, no credible explanation of events leading up to the hospitalisation of the victims has been offered.

Most attention thus far has focused on the “contaminated item” which Sturgess and Rowley are deemed to have come into contact with. Suggested items have ranged from a bag, a pot or an unspecified container, to a syringe or a cigarette butt. Besides the complete lack of evidence for these claims, none make sense even taken at face value.

How a cigarette butt is supposed to have become contaminated with a significant dose of nerve agent or came to be shared between Rowley and Sturgess is not explained. Nor is where any of the other items might have been picked up—as it remains wholly unclear as to how long the alleged agent can persist in the environment and remain effective and in what conditions.

The pair’s contact with any “contaminated item” is open to serious questioning. The Skripals, who both survived, were supposedly poisoned—in one explanation given—via a high concentration of novichok applied to their front door handle. Now it is suggested that Sturgess died after passing contact with an item that was not found on her person or anywhere on her known route in the 48 hours before being taken ill.

According to reports, the day before falling ill, the two were present at Sturgess’ homeless shelter, John Baker

House, in Salisbury at 12:20 p.m. They then visited shops in Salisbury and the Queen Elizabeth Gardens, returning to John Baker House at 4:20 p.m., before catching a bus to Amesbury at 10:30 p.m. and ending up at Rowley's house.

An ambulance was called for Sturgess at 10:15 a.m. the next morning. In the meantime, Rowley travelled to a Boots chemist to pick up his methadone prescription at 12 noon, before returning home. He then visited the Amesbury Baptist Centre at 1:45 p.m. for a hog roast, arriving home again at 3 p.m. An ambulance was called for him at 6:20 p.m.

A mutual friend, Sam Hobson, was with the two for much of this time. Hobson told the press he saw them the evening before they fell ill and then called into Rowley's house the next morning, remaining until Rowley was taken to hospital.

In addition to an activity log, created out of 1,300 hours of CCTV footage, and the eyewitness account, police have searched Sturgess' and Rowley's residences and vehicles and have access to a staff of 100 counter-terrorism officers. Yet fully nine days after Rowley was first attended by paramedics in hazmat suits, the public is none the wiser.

The strange failure of the police to progress the investigation is matched by a seemingly more relaxed approach to the "threat to the public" notices sent out over the Skripals, despite this latest incident resulting in an actual fatality.

One police officer, "seeking medical advice" according to Wiltshire police, was swiftly seen and discharged from Salisbury District hospital on Saturday, with a spokesman saying, "We would like to reiterate the advice from Public Health England (PHE) that the risk to the wider public remains low." PHE professor Paul Cosford simply advised the public "not to pick up any strange items such as needles, syringes or unusual containers" and to "Wash your clothes in a washing machine and to keep your items double-bagged and securely fastened, if they are dry-clean only."

Hobson, who had close contact with Sturgess and Rowley and shared their environments for several hours, has not been screened for traces of poison.

The proceedings on the ground mirror the wariness of senior officials in their statements.

That said, it is entirely possible that, once the police, government and media have coordinated their version of events, the finger will be pointed once again at Russia. The security-intelligence apparatus, already beset by the

ongoing crisis over Brexit and instability of May's government, is anxiously waiting to see how the upcoming NATO summit and US President Donald Trump's meetings with May and Putin play out.

The fact remains that the most credible explanation for the origins of the alleged poisonings is Porton Down rather than Moscow.

The UK chemical weapons research centre is located between Salisbury and Amesbury and is just as capable of producing novichok as analysing it. The entire area is covered with security installations. The large Bulford military base, which is also home to the Royal Military Police Special Investigation Branch, lies less than two miles northeast of Amesbury and Tidworth military base just beyond that.

At the time of the Skripals' poisoning, a major chemical warfare exercise had been carried out by the Ministry of Defence on Salisbury Plain—just a few miles from Salisbury—just days before Sergei and Yulia were found unconscious.

March's Exercise Wessex Storm, focused on "training for chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear warfare" according to a government press release at the time. Between April 21 to May 4, Salisbury Plain was host to one of Europe's largest military exercises, Joint Warrior, involving 12,000 personnel from 17 nations, wargaming against Russia.

Another unexplained piece of the Skripal affair is that ex-MI6 agent Pablo Miller, Sergei's former handler, is also known to live nearby. His involvement remains hidden, with the media fully implementing a government Defence Advisory Notice.

Nothing has been heard of from the Skripals in public, save a stage-managed statement that Yulia gave from a secret location after being spirited away from hospital by intelligence and police officers.



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