

Police criticised over custody death

Paratrooper's family renews call for public inquiry

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The police officers at the centre of a controversy over the death of a black paratrooper will be criticised tomorrow in a scathing report by the Independent Police Complaints Commission.

Christopher Alder's death in April 1998 became one of the most controversial in police custody, when closed-circuit TV footage was recovered showing the father-of-two gasping for air as officers chatted and joked around him.

The film showed how 37-year-old Alder received no help from five police officers, who thought he was play acting, as he lost his fight for life. It took 11 minutes for him to stop breathing. Afterwards, as Alder lay dead, monkey-like noises were detected on the audio tape.

Following an inquest lasting seven weeks, a jury returned a verdict of unlawful killing, citing 'positional asphyxia'.

Despite the verdict, the Crown Prosecution Service initially insisted that manslaughter charges would not be brought. After the family's lawyers submitted fresh medical reports, the CPS changed its position.

But the officers, Sergeant John Dunn and Police Constables Matthew Barr, Nigel Dawson, Neil Blakey and Mark Ellerington, were cleared at Teesside crown court when a judge halted their manslaughter trial and ruled there was no evidence to convict. A police disciplinary hearing later cleared them of neglect of duty.

David Blunkett, the then Home Secretary, refused the Alder family's demands for a public inquiry, but in 2004, after the BBC broadcast the CCTV footage on its Rough Justice programme, Death on Camera, he asked the IPCC to review what lessons could be learnt from the incident.

Humberside police authority agreed to the retirement of four of the five police officers on medical grounds in 2004.

But although the officers cannot face further disciplinary action, The Observer has discovered that Nick Hardwick, chairman of the IPCC, has told them some or all of the officers will be publicly criticised in the report.

'This is a substantial, hard-hitting report,' said a source close to the case. 'Individuals have been warned they will be criticised when it is published.'

'The report's findings, however, are going to be broader than the police issue. It will also make recommendations for a closer relationship between the police and the healthcare services.'

But Janet Alder, Christopher's sister, has said that however hard-hitting the criticisms in the report, her brother has yet to get justice. 'We have never heard the officers' accounts of the death, since they exercised their right not to testify at the inquest and the trial collapsed before they gave evidence,' she said.

Alder says she is determined to continue her fight for a public inquiry.

Christopher Alder was 'partially dragged, partially carried' into police custody by PC Blakey, the only one of the five not retired, and PC Dawson.

The police position has always been that the officers had no idea how serious the injuries were.

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