

# 'Racist' police officers laughed as man lay dying

- Five condemned over ex-paratrooper's death
- Failings of earlier inquiries by forces criticised

---

**Rosie Cowan**, *crime correspondent*

Tue 28 Mar 2006 08.29 BST

The police watchdog yesterday accused a group of officers of "unwitting racism" after they ignored a black man dying on the floor beside them while they carried on laughing and chatting. Former paratrooper Christopher Alder, 37, died in a Hull police station eight years ago - one of the most controversial deaths in custody ever - following his arrest in hospital after he suffered head injuries in a fight outside a nightclub.

Yesterday, the Independent Police Complaints Commission published a devastating 400-page report, accusing the officers who dealt with Mr Alder of "the most serious neglect of duty", in which "unwitting racism" played a major part.

The commission also showed horrifying CCTV footage of Mr Alder's last 11 minutes as he lay face down, choking and rasping on the floor, his trousers around his knees, while officers looked on, but made no effort to help him. Nick Hardwick, the IPCC chairman, said Mr Alder's death in the early hours of April 1 1998 was "unnecessary, undignified and unnoticed" and accused the officers involved of "disgraceful conduct".

He did not believe any police officer had assaulted the father of two. But in a damning indictment, he said he believed the officers' failings were "largely due to assumptions they made about him [Mr Alder] based on negative racial stereotypes". They later claimed that they had thought he was drunk or pretending to be unconscious.

"I cannot say for certain that Mr Alder would have been treated more appropriately had he been white," Mr Hardwick said, "but I believe the fact he was black stacked the odds more heavily against him. All the experts agreed that at the very least the officers' neglect undoubtedly did deny him the chance of life."

Mr Hardwick also condemned a catalogue of errors by individuals and organisations after Mr Alder's death, including the failings of two subsequent police inquiries by the Humberside and West Yorkshire forces, and the internal disciplinary hearing.

The NHS watchdog warned that Mr Alder's death exposed a dangerous lack of safeguards for patients who became aggressive in hospital accident and emergency departments "most nights of the week". Anna Walker, chief executive of the Healthcare Commission, called for national guidelines to stop patients being discharged into police custody before their health needs were fully met.

Mr Alder's sister, Janet Alder, said the IPCC highlighted serious failings, which the family believed could only be addressed by a public inquiry. Mr Alder's sons, Leon and Kelvin Wilson, said: "The officers should be punished because they have done wrong, and as a message to other officers who might mistreat black prisoners. Dad was the victim of a serious assault but was treated like a criminal."

Tim Hollis, the current Humberside chief constable, answered Mr Hardwick's call for an immediate and unreserved apology to the Alder family. His two predecessors had only expressed regret. But Mr Hollis, who was not with Humberside at the time of Mr Alder's death, said: "The time is right for me publicly to apologise to Christopher Alder's family for our failure to treat Christopher with sufficient compassion and to the desired standard."

In 2002, a judge halted a criminal trial against the five Humberside officers concerned, ordering them to be acquitted of manslaughter and misconduct, and in June 2003 they were cleared of any disciplinary offences.

But Mr Hardwick condemned the "lack of common sense and common decency" of the four officers who were with Mr Alder when he died - John Dunn, a sergeant, and constables Matthew Barr, Nigel Dawson and Neil Blakely. "Their failures were personal and individual," Mr Hardwick said. "Their behaviour has disgraced police officers and the police service as a whole."

He also criticised the fifth officer, Acting Sergeant Mark Ellerington, who, according to Mr Hardwick, was directly involved in the events leading to the death, but to a lesser extent than the other four.

Dunn, Barr, Dawson and Ellerington retired on medical grounds in December 2004, but PC Blakely is still serving with the Humberside force. Mr Hardwick said the five men's acquittal in court did not amount to an endorsement of their actions, and he condemned their refusal to cooperate with the IPCC review, especially given that no further criminal or disciplinary proceedings could be started against them. "I think they owed it to Mr Alder's family, their colleagues in the police service, and the wider public on whose behalf they served, to account fully for their actions on the night of Mr Alder's death," said Mr Hardwick.

The five officers issued a statement through the Humberside Police Federation saying they were "deeply disappointed" at the outcome of the IPCC review. "The officers concerned categorically deny that they were in any way neglectful of their duties, or that their handling of the situation was

influenced by race," said John Savage, chairman of the federation. "They also deny they were guilty of racism, unwitting or otherwise."

**Most viewed**