

Olaseni ('Seni') Lewis, deceased

9 May 2017

Statement by Raju Bhatt, solicitor for Seni's family:

"The evidence at the inquest into Seni's death established that he was effectively restrained to death by police officers who knew better: police officers who were fully aware that the prolonged restraint in which they held Seni was dangerous, carrying an inherent risk of imminent death.

"We have seen too many deaths in similar circumstances of prolonged police restraint, from Richard O'Brien, Ibrahima Sey and Roger Sylvester in the 1990's, to Sean Rigg, Kingsley Burrell and Thomas Orchard in the last decade. Many of those who died in these circumstances – like Seni – were black men and most of them were suffering an episode of mental illness. Each of these men – like Seni – need not have died, if only those responsible within our police service had been able and willing to confront the lessons to be learnt from previous deaths; to say: no more!

"In Seni's case, that failure on the part of the police service has been aided and abetted by the failure of those at the IPCC who were tasked with the responsibility to investigate his death: a responsibility that they seemed utterly incapable of fulfilling. This failure of the IPCC is largely the reason why this inquest did not take place until six and a half years after Seni's death: six and a half years which were allowed to pass before there was any proper scrutiny of the circumstances of the death; six and a half years during which the investigative process for police restraint deaths revealed itself to be unfit for purpose.

"For Seni's family, these failures of the police and the IPCC followed that of the hospital to which they had turned to look after Seni: a hospital at which the staff and management alike proved incapable of providing the basic care needed by him, but instead they allowed the police to restrain him to death while he was in their care.

"In 2015, Theresa May appointed Dame Elish Angiolini to conduct an independent review of deaths and serious incidents in police custody. She did so as Home Secretary, following a meeting with Seni's family at which she appeared to recognise the intolerable nature of the failures that they – and others in their position – have had to endure over the years. Some two years later, it is high time that Dame Elish's report is published and its recommendations implemented without any further delay, so that other families may be spared their fate."

Ends