

INQUEST CONCLUDES ON DEATH OF MENTALLY ILL MAN AFTER RESTRAINT BY METROPOLITAN POLICE

9.30am, Thursday 18 May, HM Coroners Court, Croydon Crown Court

The inquest into the death of Glen Howard, a 54 year old man who died on the 1st January 1999 will conclude tomorrow. Mr Howard after having been in a coma for almost thirteen months, following an incident on the evening of 10th December 1997 when he was restrained by police officers from Sutton police station, outside his home. He had a long history of mental health problems that sometimes required hospital treatment. At other times he lived in sheltered accommodation in the community.

On the 8 December he had been sectioned under Section 135 of the Mental Health Act 1983. On the evening of 10 December a nurse at the hospital contacted Sutton Police to report him missing. He had absconded from hospital on previous occasions to go home to feed his tropical fish and then returning to the hospital. On this occasion, however, the police arrived at his home and were let in by the caretaker. On the police accounts (although initially compliant) at the point of leaving Mr Howard tried to “give them the slip” and a struggle ensued. He was initially restrained and handcuffed by two police officers before others arrived and joined in the restraint. At this stage he was handcuffed with his arms at the back and lying on his front. At some point it was noticed that he had been sick and he was rolled on to his side and carried to a police van. It is unclear whether he was carried because he was by then unconscious or semi-conscious and unable to get into the van or was still struggling and still under restraint. Once in the van he was taken to Sutton Police station where-upon it was noticed that his head was lolling back and his mouth open. He was taken to hospital and never regained consciousness remaining on a ventilator until 1 January 1999.

The inquest is the first opportunity that Glen’s brother Barry Howard has had to find out about the full circumstances about his death and the conduct of those with responsibility for his care. The length of time he lay in a coma and the length of time of the police investigation has exacerbated the family’s grief.

The police investigation has been deeply unsatisfactory. The Metropolitan Police under the supervision of the Police Complaints Authority have investigated the death. The original investigating officer had to be replaced halfway through the inquiry and the PCA were forced to complain about the investigation in December 1998, asking the police investigator for more information. They did not issue a Certificate of Satisfaction with the inquiry until 14 October 1999.

Despite a new voluntary protocol concerning the disclosure of information to families prior to an inquest the Metropolitan Police have been obstructive and have refused to allow the family access to the Investigating Officer’s report and charged them photocopying expenses, contrary to Home Office Guidance.