

Inquest into death of ‘suicide risk’ prisoner

10am Friday 6 October 2000-10-05 Coroners Court,
Fire station premises, London Road, Manchester
Sitting with HM Coroner Mr L Gorodkin

The inquest into the death in prison of 28 year-old John Leicester opens on Friday October 6th. It is expected to last one day. John Leicester was found hanging in his cell in Manchester prison’s hospital wing on 21 July 1999. He had been in prison for 24 hours.

John Leicester had a history of mental health problems and had been receiving treatment from the psychiatric unit of the local hospitals in Manchester. Following an incident at the hospital when he was to be sectioned he allegedly started a small fire and ran off and was arrested by police. On 20 July he appeared in court and the Magistrates were informed that he had tried to kill himself and there was evidence by x-ray of his having swallowed razor blades. Due to a lack of hospital beds he was remanded to Manchester Strangeways medical wing for assessment by a forensic psychiatrist. The police had looked after him with considerable care and warned that he had tried to strangle himself. Group 4 responsible for his escort warned that he was suicidal and should be closely observed. A suicide at risk form was opened.

Once at the prison he was initially placed in a shared cell with a prison listener; a prisoner trained to support suicidal prisoners. A decision was taken the next day to remove John Leicester to a single cell where he was placed on a 15-minute watch. His shoelaces remained with him and he was found hanging from the cell door.

The inquest will be the first opportunity for Mr Leicester’s family to find out how someone at such a clear and obvious risk of suicide was able to die in such appalling circumstances. There were eight self-inflicted deaths in Manchester prison last year and there are serious concerns about the standards of health care available and the treatment and care of at risk prisoners. INQUEST believes that this is a shocking case that demonstrates why the mentally ill should be diverted from custody. It is also concerned that Manchester prison has consistently failed to learn the lessons from previous deaths.

INQUEST has arranged for barrister Colin Hutchinson to represent the family at the inquest without the benefit of public funding that is available for the Prison Service to be legally represented.