



Illustration: Tom Gaul



The finger of blame

How forces are trying to prevent deaths in police custody as officers are increasingly under the spotlight. Carol Jenkins reports

A death in police contact provokes angry public reaction and the finger of blame is often pointed firmly at the officer concerned, usually before any conclusion is reached about their culpability.

Morale within the force can also suffer if it is perceived that any officers involved in such tragic incidents are not properly supported by the force and the investigation into the incident is unnecessarily lengthy.

The Independent Police Complaints Commission recorded 118 deaths during or following police contact in 2005/06.

Forces are now recognising that the fall-out from deaths in police contact is a high price to pay both in terms of public and staff confidence in the organisation and an increasing emphasis is being placed on prevention of such incidents rather than minimising the impact once a tragedy occurs.

Delegates attending a recent Capita conference, which looked at the current issues relating to deaths in police contact, heard that forces are now putting measures in place to try to prevent deaths occurring in the first place.

The Met is now placing prevention at the top of its agenda. Although there were only 17 deaths in police contact recorded in the force in 2005/2006, out of the quarter of a million people who passed through police care in this year. However, Det Ch Insp Brian Dillon, director of professional standards, says it is '17 too many'. As a result professional standards departments are now not only responsible for investigating deaths in police contact once they occur, but for the first time in the organisation's history, they play a major role in trying to prevent deaths occurring in the first place.

It has just launched a new support programme which will see representatives from professional

standards visiting every borough in London on a rolling programme to find out what the current issues and concerns are and to offer help, support and guidance. It also hosts an annual seminar to discuss the issues involved and best practice which has now become so popular it is attended by delegates from around the world.

Det Ch Insp Dillon said: "The support programme is a key area of business for us and prevention and organisational learning is at the heart of the professional standards department."

The force is also piloting the use of defibrillators in four custody suites in London to help officers respond quickly if a prisoner needs assistance.

"At first police were reticent about those but the feedback we've had is that people don't want them to go because the degree of comfort and security is immense," explains Det Ch Insp Dillon.

"INQUEST is calling for a national database detailing findings about all deaths in police care."

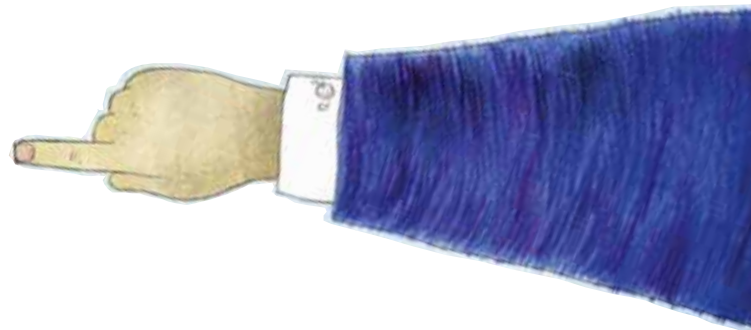
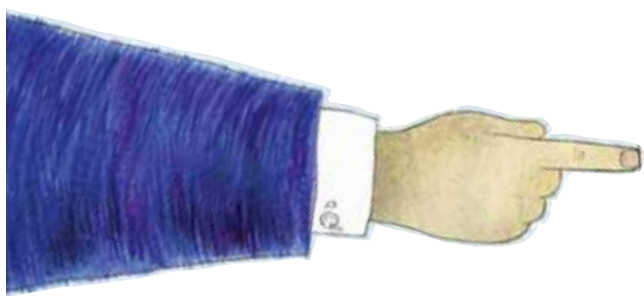
The force is also looking at how it can improve the service to families affected by a death in police contact and now appoints a family liaison officer each time an incident occurs, paying particular attention to keeping families informed about the process.

Helen Shaw, co-director of the charity INQUEST, which provides independent and free legal advice and support to people on inquest procedures in England and Wales, told delegates about the importance of keeping families informed through what can often be a bewildering process.

She said: "Bereaved families should be entitled to an explanation about the investigation, information about progress and full involvement in the process. They should also have a choice as to how they receive information gathered as part of the investigation and receive information about the investigation irrespective of whether they are involved."

INQUEST is calling for a national database detailing findings about all deaths in police care to ensure that all those involved can learn from past incidents.

Some forces are now looking at radical new ways



to staff custody suites with more support staff working alongside custody sergeants. Ch Insp Bruce Matthews, who is head of detainee handling at Sussex Police, believes that an innovative project that has now been adopted in his force to civilianise custody staff can help prevent deaths in police contact because it helps free up time for custody sergeants to deal with the serious custody work.

The force entered into a PFI contract which has meant a private contractor has designed, built, financed and now operates six custody centres in the force – providing staff such as doctors, nurses and civilian jailers to assist the custody sergeant. The force ensures that standards remain high by monitoring the contract on a monthly basis.

The issue of the civilianisation of custody staff and whether or not it helps professionalise the custody environment and prevent deaths occurring is currently a major cause of concern for the Police Federation as other forces such as Thames Valley are planning to go a step further than Sussex and eventually civilianise the role of the custody sergeant.

Julian Clapp, the chairman of the Federation's National Custody Forum and a member of Sussex Federation says that training and adequate numbers of properly trained police officers are key to a safer custody environment. He welcomed the new custody officer's manual recently produced by Centrex but warned that the manual needed to be supported with training.

He said: "It's a good manual and should be a 'living document' that is backed up by training that is of a national standard so that a custody officer working in Brighton has got the same level of training as someone working in Liverpool."

He also highlighted plans by Centrex to introduce a new custody sergeants' training programme, which will be rolled out next year, but questioned the relevance of the distance learning aspect of the course. The new training is a combination of distance learning, constant assessment and classroom-based training.

"You could argue that distance learning has its place but there's a lot to be said for getting people together in a room for a face-to-face training session and learning for their experiences," says Mr Clapp.

Another important issue which was raised at a recent meeting of the National Custody Forum was adequate levels of staff in custody blocks.

Mr Clapp explained: "Forces should be ensuring there are sufficient numbers of sergeants on duty because at the moment some of them are trying to get a lot out of too few. If custody suites are understaffed then the custody sergeant is put under additional stress and strain making the job harder."

He rejects claims that greater civilianisation of custody will improve standards, believing the opposite to be the case.

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"The concern is when we've got private security people or non police officers, with the best will in the world they haven't had the level of police training. We've got a number of police officers who are short in terms of service and when people are involved in an arrest they look to the sergeant as a supervisor to get help and advice."

In terms of future challenges for the service as a result of greater civilianisation, Richard Glenister from the special crime division of the Crown Prosecution Service, explained an existing anomaly that needed to be addressed by courts in future.

At present, a police officer can be charged for 'misconduct in a public office' if it is found he or she is culpable after a death in police contact has occurred. However, the courts don't recognise the same charge for police staff.

He explained: "This is a real grey area that needs to be clarified because at the moment courts don't want the misconduct in a public office extended to civilian employees."

"The result of this is that it could give rise to unfairness where you could have a police officer prosecuted for misconduct and not a civilian which obviously has very serious implications for the police service as a whole."