

**C**ONTROVERSY over deaths in police custody often centres on the methods of restraint used by officers and the safety of vulnerable detainees in police cells. But there are two less publicised, primarily substance-related, causes of injury and fatalities during police arrest: drug-induced panics and drug swallowing.

First reported in the US in the early 1990s among crack cocaine users, 'excited delirium' was characterised by bizarre behaviour, resulting in conflict with the police, that could result in death. Generally it is provoked by the consumption of a stimulant, usually cocaine, or the onset of a psychotic episode generating hyperthermia and delirium. Individuals might remove all their clothes and behave in a confused, unpredictable or even violent manner.

### SUDDEN DEATH

When emergency services are called, and the individual is restrained, they will often display exceptional strength and carry on struggling for some time, followed by sudden collapse and almost immediate death. It is believed to be the combination of hyperthermia, delirium and the response to restraint that leads to heart failure and death.

In a 1998 Canadian study of 21 unexpected deaths of people with excited delirium, it was reported that all of the deaths were associated with restraint, with 18 having been held in a prone position and the remaining three individuals subjected to pressure on the neck. The researchers argued that excited delirium was caused by a psychiatric disorder in 12 subjects and by cocaine-induced psychosis in a further eight. Yet they found that levels of cocaine detected post mortem were similar to levels reported in recreational users and lower than those found in individuals who died from cocaine intoxication.

The recent verdict in the inquest into the death of Roger Sylvester in police custody indicated that 'cannabis-induced delirium' had been instrumental in the death. In this case, a history of cocaine use and mental illness may have prompted the delirious episode. The Police Complaints Authority (PCA) report, *Policing Acute Behavioural Disturbance*, said quick release of restraints and immediate transfer to hospital is crucial in preventing death.

### DRUG SWALLOWING

According to the PCA's study on deaths in custody, the most common category of cases involved the deliberate swallowing of drugs – generally cocaine powder or crack cocaine – either immediately prior to arrest or on the way to the police station. Cocaine was detected at post mortem in 24 of the 43 drug deaths studied in the PCA study, while 29 out of 43 involved the oral consumption of drugs.

The oral consumption of drugs at or around the point of arrest is a common practice among street dealers as a way of avoiding possession with intent to supply charges, but risks death in two ways. First, hypoxia (lack of oxygen) can result from a failure to swallow the packages.

Second, the rupturing of poorly packed drug packages in the gut can result in massive drug

# Cardiac arrests

**David Best** on the hidden causes of deaths in police custody



overdoses and rapid fatality. The high rate of oral consumption in police-related drug deaths would indicate the high levels of risk associated with this practice.

### HARM REDUCTION

For drug swallowing deaths, the message is clear. If individuals are going to transport or conceal drug packages in their mouths they must be informed - by criminal justice agencies and drug services - of the risks they are taking. Police must operate a safety first approach whereby all suspected swallowers must go to hospital rather than into custody.

Deaths from excited delirium and swallowing are potentially preventable, both by early recognition and intervention by police officers and police physicians and by the avoidance of unnecessary restraints or aggressive restraint techniques. Risks can be lowered through information-sharing and better training to ensure that harm reduction messages are understood and taken up by police forces and the vulnerable populations with whom they engage. ■

Police detain a suspected crack cocaine dealer in south London. He was arrested after they recovered some small packages from his mouth

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