

PRESS RELEASE

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COLETTE LYNCH INQUEST JURY DELIVERS DAMNING VERDICT

A jury has today reached a damning verdict in relation to the state's role in the killing of Colette Lynch, stabbed to death by her partner Percy Wright in February 2005 with their two year old daughter in his arms. The jury found that a number of failings by the police, mental health services and social services contributed to Colette's death. In what is thought to be the first inquest to consider state failings to protect the life of a woman facing domestic violence, the jury held that a number of factors contributed to Colette's unlawful killing by Percy Wright:

- In relation to the police:
 - o Failing to arrest Percy Wright on 1 and 2 February 2005 (following a serious domestic violence incident at Colette's home on the night of the 1st);
 - o Failing to implement their force domestic violence policy;
 - o Failing to identify that Colette's children needed protection;
- In relation to mental health services:
 - o Failing to diagnose and treat Percy Wright's illness after 20 January 2005 (when he was seen and presented with floridly psychotic symptoms);
 - o Failing to ensure he was seen and assessed on 1 February (after Colette called them expressing fears for her safety);
 - o Failing to ensure that Percy Wright was assessed under the Mental Health Act on 3 February 2005;
- In relation to social services:
 - o Failing to ensure that Percy Wright was assessed on 2 and 3 February 2005;
 - o Failing to identify that Colette's children needed protection and to ensure they were protected on 3 February.

The jury reached this conclusion after hearing ten weeks of evidence from the police officers, doctors, nurses and social workers who had contact with Colette and with Percy Wright in the months before her death.

The Coroner will now consider making recommendations to the relevant authorities to ensure lessons are learned.

Colette's mother, Helen Lynch, said:

'To have watched and listened to the people who Colette was depending on to protect her life, to have seen the calibre of those people, to hear the lies that they told about

Colette at the time and the lies they have told themselves since about their role in her death – words can't describe it. It's clear that Colette was invisible to the authorities until she was dead. As she said to her sister Patricia on the last day of her life, "It must take someone to get murdered for anybody to do anything".

We are very grateful to the jury for their verdict. We can only hope it will help ensure that lessons are learned to protect the lives of others.'

Colette's solicitor, Sarah Ricca of Deighton Guedalla, said:

'The jury heard evidence of a litany of failings on the part of the authorities who were supposed to protect Colette. They were asked to decide whether such failings contributed to Colette's death. Their answer to this question was a resounding 'yes'. What an inquest jury can't answer however is *why* so many got it so wrong. That's a question we think needs to be considered in a public inquiry, so we can get to the heart of why, time and again, action is not taken that could protect women's lives. What is it about domestic violence, what is it about attitudes to women, that leads to this systemic failure to protect them? Put simply, we need a Steven Lawrence inquiry for women.'

Colette Lynch's family will now be proceeding with a civil claim against the three authorities.

Evidence heard by the jury

Over 10 weeks, the jury heard evidence over the course of 10 weeks of numerous failings by the state authorities:

In the months before the killing

- Colette had been concerned about the deteriorating mental health of Percy Wright for some time from the middle of 2004, as was his GP. Both tried to get local mental health services to identify and treat the problem, with no result.
- On 20 January 2005, psychiatric nurse Wayne Downs from Rugby mental health's Crisis Team saw Percy Wright and recorded him as presenting with a series of psychotic symptoms, including hearing voices and believing he can change the weather by changing his clothes. However the nursing notes concluded that Wright displayed 'no real mental health problems'. The psychiatrists involved with Wright's treatment at Rugby's Linden Unit say they were unaware of the change in presentation until 2 February.
- The police had records of previous incidents of violence involving Percy Wright:
 - the previous November his sister reported that he had tried to strangle her
 - on 19 January staff at the Town Hall called the police after he was aggressive and threatening

- on 26 January, staff at the Revenue Office called police again after Percy Wright was aggressive and threatening

However checks made of the police's STORM computer system in the days before Colette's killing failed to reveal these incidents.

On 1st February 2005:

- There was a violent incident at Colette's home, when Percy Wright came to the house, threatened to slit Colette's throat and smashed her window. Colette escaped out of the broken window, injuring herself in the process. Her three children were in bed upstairs.
- Two police officers, Theresa Cottingham and Charlotte Hall, attended the scene but failed to arrest Percy Wright, as required to do by the force domestic violence policy. They claimed that Colette had said she never wanted to press charges.
- Colette called the police again later that night to complain about their inaction. She said she'd never said she didn't want to press charges. She said she wanted him sectioned and 'if that's what it takes' she would press charges.
- She was told by the communications officer that the police were 'exceptionally busy' that night. However the inquest heard evidence that there were two officers available at that time to take a statement.
- An appointment was made for police to see Colette the next day, but a communications supervisor Colin Barker closed down the logs regarding the incident the next morning and the police never kept the appointment.

On 2nd February 2005:

- The consultant psychiatrist Dr Haweel said he had only discovered on 1st February that Wright presented on 20 January with psychotic symptoms. On 2nd February he was told of the attack on Colette's home the previous night. He requested that a Mental Health Act assessment be arranged. Subsequently a formal assessment was turned into requests that Wright attend outpatients appointments, which he failed to do.
- The police failed to attend the appointment at 3.30 with Colette in relation to Wright's attack and threat to kill the previous night.
- Social services claim they took child protection measures aimed at Colette's children as well as Wright's 14 year old nephew, who lived with him. The family dispute these claims, saying they focussed exclusively on Wright's nephew. They say contemporaneous records confirm this view.
- Colette's family also dispute claims by social services that they offered Colette a refuge. Contemporaneous documents refer to Colette herself raising the issue of going to a refuge. They refer to social services suggesting she stay at her

mothers, an address known to Wright. They record Colette saying she couldn't stay at her mother's but her mother would stay with her.

- A children's social worker, Claire Coulson, an Approved Social Worker Virginia Hyam and two police officers, PCs Green and McNaughton, went to Wright's home in the evening. The police did not arrest him despite the incident on the previous night, even when he held his hands out to them to be cuffed. Wright said he was 'pissed'. He did not present as psychotic. The inquest has heard that alcohol can mask psychotic symptoms and that in any event such symptoms may not be constantly visible. Nevertheless a decision was taken in consultation with the on duty psychiatrist Dr Naz not to formally assess him under the Mental Health Act.
- Colette's brother Joseph Lynch made a number of calls to the police, mental health services and social services, urging them to act to protect his sister.

On 3rd February 2005:

- No mental health act assessment took place. A strategy meeting attended by approved social workers and mental health services decided to offer Wright a further outpatients appointment on the 4th.
- How this decision was reached remains unclear. However mention was made of 'domestic issues'. Also reference was made to information that had been obtained from a Forensic Psychiatric Nurse, Vikki Spink. She had told the psychiatrist and mental health nurses that Colette had made allegations against a previous partner but had not pressed charges. This information was believed by those at the meeting to have come from the police. In fact the jury heard that the information had come from the previous partner with whom the Forensic Nurse had had contact. They also heard that this partner had in fact been violent to Colette and social services had arranged for Colette and her children to go into a refuge to escape him.
- No further steps were taken by social services to protect Colette and her children in the absence of Wright being assessed and sectioned.
- Joseph Lynch made further calls to the mental health services and social services. He warned them that tomorrow would be too late.
- Percy Wright came to Colette's house that night at around 9.20 brandishing a knife. He took their 2 year old daughter from her cot, attacked Colette's mother Helen and then attacked and killed Colette as she tried to flee down the street.

END

Notes for editors

- *Percy Wright pleaded guilty to manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility and to GBH with intent on Colette's mother Helen Lynch at Birmingham Crown Court on 26 August 2005. The psychiatrists instructed by the*

prosecution and defence agreed that he was suffering from a psychotic episode, probably brought on by paranoid schizophrenia. He was given a hospital order. He was conditionally released in April this year.

- *The IPCC conducted an independent investigation into the police's role. Its report http://www.ipcc.gov.uk/lynch_executive_summary.pdf found a number of police officers and communications staff had failed in their duties and made a number of wide-ranging recommendations to improve protection for women facing domestic violence.*
- *In November 2007, in the first ever public police disciplinary hearing, two police officers, Theresa Cottingham and Charlotte Hall, were fined five days pay for their failings in relation to the domestic violence incident on 1st February 2005.*
- *West Midlands Strategic Health Authority held an independent inquiry into the role of mental health services. <http://www.warwickshire.nhs.uk/CmsDocuments/fd66a69f-6a0c-4176-bd2b-354418968445.pdf> Its report was highly critical of the actions and inactions of staff concerned with Colette Lynch and Percy Wright in the months before the killing.*
- *There has been no previous inquiry into the role of social services.*
- *The inquest into the death of Colette Lynch began on 6 October 2009 and is scheduled to continued until shortly before Christmas. The Deputy Assistant Coroner is Sir Christopher Pitchers, a former high court judge. The inquest is taking place at Leamington Town Hall. The Coroner is sitting with a jury.*

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