

David Kelly Death - paramedics query verdict

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Kelly death - paramedics query verdict

The Hutton inquiry found that the scientist caught in the storm over the 'sexed up' Iraq dossier committed suicide. Now, for the first time, the experienced ambulance crew who were among the first on the scene tell of their doubts about the decision. Special report by Antony Barnett

Antony Barnett Sunday December 12, 2004

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In the cramped office of an Oxford law firm, Dave Bartlett's solicitor turns to him and asks if he is happy to stand by the dramatic comment he has just made about the death of Dr David Kelly. Bartlett's eyes do not waver. 'Yes. I have always said that had it been a member of my family I wouldn't have accepted what they came out with.'

Sitting next to Bartlett is his colleague, Vanessa Hunt. Like him, she has been a paramedic for more than 15 years. She does not hesitate either. 'There just wasn't a lot of blood... When somebody cuts an artery, whether accidentally or intentionally, the blood pumps everywhere. I just think it is incredibly unlikely that he died from the wrist wound we saw.'

On 18 July last year Bartlett and Hunt received an emergency call to attend a suspected suicide. Over the years they have raced to the scenes of dozens of attempted suicides in which somebody has cut their wrists. In only one case has the victim been successful.

'That was like a slaughterhouse,' recalls Hunt. 'Just think what it would be like with five or six pints of milk splashed everywhere.' If you slit your wrists, that is the equivalent amount of blood you would have to lose.

But this was not the scene which greeted the two paramedics when their ambulance arrived at Harrowdown Hill woods in Oxfordshire, where the body of Dr Kelly, the weapons expert, had been found.

The death would become one of the biggest news stories of the year, a tale of intrigue and confusion which would threaten the future of Tony Blair. Kelly was a government scientist who had been revealed as the source of a broadcast by BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan which questioned the veracity of the government's report on Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. It is remembered for the allegation that Downing Street 'sexed up' the report to make the case for going to war against Iraq.

With Kelly's body lying in the woods and Blair facing political meltdown, the government

announced the Hutton inquiry to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death. Its report said Kelly had died by 'bleeding from incised wounds to his left wrist'. No shadow of a doubt.

Now the paramedics, two of the first people to see Kelly, want to question that judgment. In their first interviews about the death, they are not trying to spin conspiracy theories. They offer no alternative explanation for Kelly's death. They have decided to speak out so that information which they believe Hutton failed to emphasise is put into the public domain.

They have no answers to the questions they have been asking themselves over the past 12 months, but they seem certain of one thing: Kelly could not have died from the wound they saw on his left wrist in the woods that Friday morning.

It was 9.40am when the emergency call came in. Bartlett and Hunt had just started their morning shift and were having coffee in the crew room of Abingdon ambulance station in Oxfordshire when they were told of an incident involving a male at Harrowdown Hill.

'On the way, we thought it might have been somebody who committed suicide in their car. That is quite common in the mornings,' said Bartlett. 'Or somebody out walking the dog who had collapsed,' said Hunt.

When they arrived at the woods 15 minutes later it was immediately clear that this was not a run-of-the-mill incident. 'There were a lot of police around,' said Hunt. 'Some were in civilian clothes and others in black jackets and army fatigues. I thought it might have been a firearms incident as there were the guys from the special armed response units.'

The paramedics parked their ambulance. Carrying their resuscitation equipment, they followed two armed-response police for about a mile until they reached a wooded area. In a clearing, they first saw Kelly's body.

'He was about 20 metres away lying flat down with his feet towards us,' said Hunt. Bartlett's first thought was that the 'poor chap had hung himself and fallen from the tree'.

As they approached the body, Hunt went to the right of Kelly and Bartlett to the left. Hunt checked for a pulse and Bartlett shone a light into his eyes to see if there was any pupil reaction. They then put four electrodes on his chest to detect any heart activity, but there was none. Kelly was pronounced dead at 10.07am.

Both saw that the left sleeves of his jacket and shirt had been pulled up to just below the elbow and there was dried blood around his left wrist.

'There was no gaping wound... there wasn't a puddle of blood around,' said Hunt. 'There was a little bit of blood on the nettles to the left of his left arm. But there was no real blood on the body of the shirt. The only other bit of blood I saw was on his clothing. It was the size of a 50p piece above the right knee on his trousers.'

Hunt found this very strange. 'If you manage to cut a wrist and catch an artery you would get a spraying of blood, regardless of whether it's an accident... Because of the nature of an arterial cut, you get a pumping action. I would certainly expect a lot more blood on his clothing, on his shirt. If you choose to cut your wrists, you don't worry about getting blood on your clothes.'

'I didn't see any blood on his right hand... If he used his right hand to cut his wrist, from an arterial wound you would expect some spray.'

Bartlett agreed: 'I remember saying to one of the policemen it didn't look like he died from that [the wrist wound] and suggesting he must have taken an overdose or something else.'

Bartlett recalls being called to one attempted suicide where the blood had spurting so high it hit the ceiling. 'Even in this incident, the victim survived. It was like The Texas Chainsaw Massacre and the guy walked out alive. We have been to a vast amount of incidents where people who have slashed their wrists, intentionally or not. Most of them are taken down the hospital and given a few stitches then sent straight back home. But there is a lot of blood. It's all over them.'

The surprise of the paramedics that there was not much blood is supported by a number of medical experts. A letter was written to the papers earlier this year questioning his death.

In particular, one group of doctors has pointed to the fact that the pathology report into Kelly's death revealed that the only artery completely severed was in his left wrist, called the ulnar artery. This is not the normal main radial artery that is used to take a pulse, but a small artery below the little finger which is hard to locate and lies deep within the wrist.

Martin Birnstingl was until recently president of the Vascular Surgical Society of Great Britain. He is a former consultant at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London and one of the country's most respected vascular surgeons.

Birnstingl said he believed it was 'extremely unlikely' for Kelly to have died by simply severing the ulnar artery. He explained that arteries have muscles around them that will constrict when severed, to prevent life-threatening loss of blood. 'It would spray blood around and make a mess. But after the blood pressure started to fall, the artery would contract and stop bleeding,' he said.

This is a view echoed by Dr Bill McQuillan, a former consultant at Edinburgh's Royal Infirmary who for 20 years has dealt with hundreds of wrist accidents. 'I have never seen one death of somebody from cutting an ulnar artery,' he said. He also pointed out that a warm bath might allow more bleeding, but in the open air the artery would simply close down. 'I can't see how he would lose more than a pint of blood.'

Despite these doubts, other forensic experts remain 'satisfied' with Hutton's verdict, including Professor Robert Forrest and Professor Chris Milroy. They claim to have seen suicides where a single slit artery led to death.

Hutton's findings were based on evidence given to the inquiry that there was more blood around Kelly's body, including a stain two to three feet in length running across the undergrowth.

But the paramedics are insistent. 'I am sure I would not have missed that amount of blood,' said Hunt.

Then there was the issue of an overdose. If Kelly had not died by slitting his wrists, perhaps he had taken tablets to hasten his death. Hutton did reveal Kelly had swallowed several painkillers, believed to have been taken from his wife's medicine cabinet. The pathologist found three blister packets of the painkiller coproxamol in Kelly's left-hand jacket pocket.

Each of these packets would have contained 10 tablets, but there was only one left, leading to the conclusion that Kelly may have swallowed 29 pills. Could this have been enough to kill him? No. Coproxamol is typically prescribed for mild back pain and consists of two compounds: paracetamol and an opiate-type drug, dextropropoxyphene. Both can be lethal if consumed in sufficient amounts, but a detailed toxicology report on Kelly's blood revealed the presence of only one-third of the dose that normally causes death.

Dr Alexander Allan, the forensic toxicologist who examined Kelly's blood and urine, told the Hutton inquiry that although the levels he found were more than therapeutic, they were significantly lower than doses that would lead to death.

Bartlett and Hunt are also concerned about another issue. The Hutton report said Kelly's body was found with his head and shoulders 'slumped against a tree'. The judge said he had seen a photograph showing his body in that position. One of the first people to find Kelly, Louise Holmes, agreed that he was resting against a tree. But by the time Bartlett and Hunt arrived, Kelly was lying flat, some feet from the tree. Had someone moved him? Had his body been searched? Why the discrepancy? None of the police officers at the scene said they had touched the body.

What next? A full independent inquest might have offered answers to some of the issues raised by the paramedics. The Hutton inquiry prevented a full inquest from taking place and, although witnesses were summoned, they were not cross-examined under oath.

The Oxfordshire coroner, Nicholas Gardiner, decided there was no public interest in reopening the inquest. After all, there had been no evidence from the police or any individual that a third party had been involved in Kelly's death. More important, his family had accepted Hutton's verdict and had no desire to reopen the case.

Yet for Michael Powers QC, a barrister and former doctor who is one of Britain's leading experts in coroner law, the lack of a public inquest is unsatisfactory.

'For an inquest to conclude that suicide is the cause of death, it has to be proved beyond reasonable doubt,' he said. 'In this case, there are a lot of gaps. The evidence of the paramedics, who are professionals, is significant. There appears to be no accurate measure of how much blood Kelly lost and a very real question, backed up by witnesses, that it was insufficient to lead to his death.'

'The toxicological evidence is very poor. There are questions over where the pills came from and how many he took.'

Like the paramedics, Powers is unwilling to suggest that Kelly might have died in mysterious circumstances. But on the evidence he has studied, he believes any inquest would be forced to conclude an open verdict.

An individual who was very close to Kelly also has serious doubts about Hutton's verdict. The person does not want to be named, but told The Observer that even if you accepted that Kelly's mental state was desperate enough for him to take his own life, it is inconceivable he would have chosen such an uncertain method.

'He was a scientist, a highly intelligent man. If he had chosen to kill himself, he would have opted for something certain, like hanging himself or throwing himself under a train. He would not have risked surviving. I can't believe he would have chosen to cut one small

artery and take some pills. The outcome would be too uncertain.'

The big question is: if Kelly did not kill himself, then what happened? No one wants to give an answer to that, though many are aware of the rumour mill and conspiracy theorists who say that the death was suspicious.

Bartlett says there is one way to put such rumours to rest: 'If they showed me photos showing a lot of blood and said he had massive amounts of drugs or another substance in his body and that killed him, I would accept it. But until then there has to be some doubt.'

Bartlett and Hunt know that by making their concerns public they will have increased those doubts. All they want is to get to the truth and a final verdict on the death of a government scientist who threatened the future of the Prime Minister, so that everyone can be satisfied.

Dave Bartlett and Vanessa Hunt sought permission from their employer, Oxfordshire Ambulance Trust, before agreeing to be interviewed. They spoke as individuals and not as representatives of the trust.

Tragedy of the weapons inspector: steps that led to death in the woods

2002

April-June: David Kelly, a Ministry of Defence scientist, is consulted over the dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

24 September: The dossier is published, including the statement that Iraq can deploy WMD within 45 minutes. Tony Blair describes the threat as 'serious and current'.

2003

29 May In a report on Radio 4's Today programme, Andrew Gilligan quotes 'a source' who believes Downing Street wanted the September dossier 'sexed up'.

30 June: Kelly writes to his manager, Bryan Wells, admitting he met Gilligan on 22 May.

4 July: MoD drafts a statement referring to Kelly as 'an unnamed official'.

9 July: Geoff Hoon, the Defence Secretary, writes to Gavyn Davies, then BBC chairman, asking him to confirm whether Kelly is the source. The BBC refuses. MoD confirms to journalists that Kelly is the official involved.

17 July: At 3pm, Kelly leaves home, telling his wife he is going for a walk. When he fails to return home by 11.45pm, his family contacts the police. He is found dead in the woods near his home the following morning.

20 July The BBC issues a statement after talking to Kelly's family, naming him as the source of Gilligan's report.

21 July: Lord Hutton is appointed head of an independent inquiry into the events surrounding Kelly's death.

2004

28 January

Hutton report published. The government is exonerated and the BBC heavily criticised.

Research: Will Lee

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