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Dyson SM, Boswell G. Sickle cell anaemia and deaths in custody in the UK and the USA.
Howard Journal of Criminal Justice: Vol 45 (1), February 2006; pp 14–28.

and posted on The Sickle Cell Society Website, at
<http://www.sicklecellsociety.org/DeathUxpl.htm>

Sickle Cell and Deaths in Custody in the UK and USA

The following is a summary of an article published in full by the Howard Journal of Criminal Justice <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/journal.asp?ref=0265-5527> .

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February 2006

Howard Journal of Criminal Justice 45 (1): 14-28

Summary

An unexplained death in custody represents an important focal point for public scrutiny of the criminal justice system, especially when excess deaths occur in those of African or African-Caribbean. Sickle cell anaemia is a serious inherited blood disorder that in the UK and USA disproportionately affecting minority ethnic groups. ***Sickle cell trait is the genetic carrier state and not an illness.*** The evidence suggests that the treatment of sickle cell in the criminal justice system is twofold. In both the UK and the USA, authorities of the criminal justice system have misused sickle cell trait to explain away ten sudden deaths, often associated with forced restraint, of black people in custody [see Table 1] Meanwhile, seven deaths have been attributable to lack of provision of health care for those prisoners suffering from the illness sickle cell anaemia [see Table 2]. Sickle cell has a long and troubled history of being misused to explain sudden deaths in police, prison or army custody, dating back to at least 1977 [see Table 3]

Table 1
Misuse of Sickle Cell to Explain Away Sudden Deaths in Custody

Date	Place	Name	Outline of Event
1974	Illinois, USA	Not recorded	Person with sickle cell trait beaten by guards. The coroner claimed the death was due to 'sickle cell crisis'.
1976	Los Angeles	Edward Dailey	Held in chokehold by police. Sickle cell held to be 'significant' in explaining his death.
1981	Los Angeles	Charles J Hill	Held in chokehold by police. Death attributed to 'sickle cell crisis'
1992	Buffalo, New York	Donald Fleming	Died in police custody. Body showed signs of serious beating. Officials claimed death due to 'cocaine abuse or sickle cell traits'
1995	Dartmoor, UK	Denis Stephens	Died following 24 hours restrained in body belt. Home Office pathologist found him 'sickle cell trait positive'. Three independent pathologists agreed sickle cell could not have been a factor.
1995	Blakenhurst Prison, UK	Alton Manning	In 1998 the Director of UK Prisons is interviewed by Jeremy Paxman on <i>Newsnight</i> about this death. The Director suggests sickle cell may have been a factor in the sudden death, and apologizes for his remarks the next day.
1998	Catterick Army Barracks, UK	William Beckley-Lines	Dies after a training run. Post-mortem reveals bruises to genital area. Cause of death attributed to 'exhaustion and sickle cell anaemia'
1999	Arkansas, USA	Eddie Bagby	Died following sharp shock exercise and pepper spray punishment. Sickle cell trait is alleged to one of several variables explaining the death.
2001	Milwaukee, USA	Mario Mallett	Died in struggle with police. Official medical examiner attributes death to 'undiagnosed sickle cell traits and cold weather'.
2003	Florida, USA	Raymond Sterling	Dies after being pepper-sprayed. Death attributed by officials to combination of factors including 'sickle cell trait'.

Table 2
Failure to Care for Those Living with Sickle Cell Anaemia Whilst in Custody

Date	Place	Name	Outline of Event
1983	Kensington, UK	James Ruddock	Died after being denied treatment for 12 hours for diabetes and sickle cell anaemia whilst in custody
1997	Nashville, USA	Anthony Bowman	Died in jail after begging for treatment for sickle cell anaemia. The prison had a contract with the doctor based on keeping costs down.
1998	Christopher Jackson	Christopher Jackson	Arrested on minor charge. Lapsed into a coma. Was not hospitalized for three days despite repeated requests for treatment.
1999	Wisconsin, USA	Kelvin Williams	Died unconscious in prison lying in his own vomit and urine.
1999	Kent, UK	Howard	Died following 48 hour gap in medical treatment over a week-end.
2001	California, USA	Charisse Shumate	Died in custody having frequently been denied prompt treatment for sickle cell anaemia. In 1995 she had led a class action against the authorities to try to compel the prison to provide medical care.
2003	Louisiana, USA	Leonard Robinson	Died following a sickle cell crisis in prison. The state blocked a review of the case because the action was not brought by the (now dead!) prisoner himself.