

Foreword



You may not know us, but we want to tell you about something very personal that shattered our lives and changed our family forever.

This is a photo of our son Seni with his grandmother. Everything you need to know about him is here in this beautiful picture. He was our baby and a gentle giant. He hated bullying and was always looking out for the less able and vulnerable people in society.

Seni was just 23 years old – an IT graduate – when he died in hospital on 3 September 2010. He died because of prolonged restraint, when he was held down by 11 police officers while he was a patient in a mental health hospital.

Seni had never had any mental health issues before, but over that bank holiday weekend in 2010 he seemed agitated and his behaviour became odd. We took him to A&E and, after an assessment, we were told to take him to Bethlem Royal Hospital. We took him there, to what we thought would be the best place for him to get help.

Seni agreed to stay overnight at the hospital as a voluntary patient. We were asked to leave him at the end of visiting hours, and we did so reluctantly. Shortly afterwards, he became agitated when he was stopped from leaving the hospital because he wanted to come home. The hospital staff 'sectioned' him and called the police who came and agreed to take Seni to a seclusion room in the hospital. He was co-operative until he stopped at the threshold of the seclusion room. As soon as he stopped, the police officers pushed him inside and forced him face down to the floor.

The police officers held Seni face down, shackled his hands with two sets of handcuffs and put his legs in two sets of restraints. They held him down like that over a period of some 45 minutes altogether, in a restraint they knew was dangerous, until he went limp. And even then, instead of treating him as a medical emergency, they simply walked away: they believed he was faking it! They left our son on the floor of a locked room, all but dead. All of this happened in the presence of hospital staff including nurses and a doctor who stood by and looked on, unable or unwilling to intervene. Seni never regained consciousness and died four days later. That is how we lost our beloved son.

At the inquest into his death, the jury found Seni died as a result of excessive, disproportionate and unreasonable restraint and force. To this day, we struggle to comprehend that our son died as he did, simply because those who were responsible for his care – police officers and medical staff alike – failed in their duty to treat him with the respect that he deserved as a human being.

In a signed statement after these events, one doctor described how the officers treated our son: ‘I felt like it wasn’t a human being that they were trying to restrain ... it was like trying to contain an animal ... after they had tied him up with the straps it seemed like when a hunter has tied the animal ... it was an uneasy feeling that I had that it was not a human being that they were restraining’. That is how he was seen and treated at that point: as an animal, rather than a petrified young man, terrified at the prospect of being put in a padded seclusion room.

We don’t want anyone else to go through this. We have been fighting for over eight years to get answers and justice for Seni. Now, through initiatives in his name – such as Seni’s Law, a parliamentary bill with cross party support designed to open up the system to greater transparency and accountability to stop the disproportionate use of force and restraint – we feel that our son may not have died in vain. If we can make sure this never happens to anyone else, that would be an amazing legacy for Seni.

That is why we are really pleased to see the publication of these new standards, but this must be just the beginning. There is so much more to do in view of the increasing number of deaths in the context of restraint. In addition to health, education and social care services, we need to get law enforcement agencies involved in these standards concerning the use of restraint. We need to ensure these standards are not just implemented, but also regulated. And we need to make sure that the use of force and restraint is not just reduced but prevented altogether when dealing with vulnerable individuals who may find themselves in Seni’s position in the future.

Aji and Conrad Lewis