

UK news

**Sheku Bayoh** 'may have asphyxiated after being held down by police'

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Evidence from postmortem into Sierra Leonean's death in custody points at positional asphyxia as the cause, says his family's lawyer

New medical evidence suggests that **Sheku Bayoh**, the Sierra Leonean man killed in police custody in Kirkcaldy, Fife, may have died from asphyxiation after being held face down by at least four officers, his family lawyer has said.

**Aamer Anwar**, the civil rights lawyer acting for **Bayoh**'s family, said at a press conference on Saturday that postmortem evidence had revealed tiny blood spots known as petechial haemorrhages on his eyes. They were an important sign that a detainee had died from positional asphyxia, he said.

**Anwar** said that **Bayoh**, a 31-year-old trainee gas engineer from Kirkcaldy, of average height and build, had been brought to the ground within 45 seconds of being confronted initially by four police officers. At least two of the officers were heavily built, with one weighing up to 159kg (25 stone).

The lawyer said that within seconds of confronting **Bayoh** on the street at 7.10am on 3 May, officers had sprayed him with CS gas and pepper spray, even though **Bayoh** was unarmed and had not initially resisted arrest – despite eyewitness reports suggesting he had been wielding a knife in the area.

At a [press conference to launch a family-led campaign for a full independent inquiry](#) into **Bayoh**'s death, **Anwar** said that some of the 11 officers involved in his arrest now claimed they had acted with force because they believed he could have been a terrorist.

**Anwar** said the family's anger with the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner (PIRC), the Scottish police misconduct watchdog, had deepened significantly because of a 32-day delay before the officers involved were interviewed by the inspectorate.

"A powerful investigating body that can hold the most powerful public body in Scotland to account is now perceived by the family as a toothless body left begging for cooperation," he said.

Flanked by **Bayoh**'s older sister, Kadijartu Johnson, a nurse in Kirkcaldy, and **Bayoh**'s brother-in-law Ade Johnson, **Anwar** said the latest evidence raised challenging and critical questions about allegations by the Scottish Police Federation (SPF) that **Bayoh** was "very large", violent and threatening the lives of the officers involved.

The family believed negative and stereotypical imagery was being used "to reinforce the image of a mad and dangerous man", **Anwar** said. Within hours of **Bayoh**'s death, rumours were circulating that an officer had been stabbed, and allegations made that he was heavily drugged.

"The family now knows as fact that when the police arrived, **Sheku Bayoh** was not carrying a knife, **Sheku Bayoh** never threatened them with a knife, and nor was one ever found on his body."

Within days of **Bayoh**'s death, the federation's lawyer Peter Watson claimed **Bayoh** had chased "a

petite female police officer” and subjected her to an “unprovoked attack by a very large man who punched, kicked and stamped on her. The officer believed she was about to be murdered and I can say that but for the intervention of the other officers that was the likely outcome.”

**Anwar** said there was no evidence for this: the PIRC has said instead that the officer went to a local hospital with **Bayoh** for a checkup, and was discharged shortly afterwards.

She rejoined her eight uniformed colleagues and a federation official at Kirkcaldy police station that Sunday morning where, **Anwar** stated, they refused to discuss the case with senior officers.

“The family has known for weeks that the first actions of the officers attending on meeting **Sheku** was to use CS spray, was to use PAVA spray, a form of pepper spray, was to raise their batons, yet at that point **Sheku** had done nothing,” the lawyer told the press conference.

“**Sheku** was brought to the ground within 45 seconds of meeting the police. Six officers were involved in trying to restrain him, apply handcuffs and putting on leg restraints and ankle restraints. He was in a prone position face down. There was a struggle but he wasn’t going anywhere, he lost consciousness and stopped breathing, never to get up again.”

After **Bayoh** stopped breathing, the officers attempted artificial respiration on the pavement without success. He arrived unconscious and unresponsive, still wearing handcuffs and leg restraints, at the Victoria hospital, where his sister worked as a nurse. He was declared dead at 9.04am.

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The family were now furious that the PIRC had failed to immediately secure the area where **Bayoh** had died, had failed to stop the officers involved from immediately meeting and potentially conferring and had failed to order them to give interviews within 48 hours.

The federation declined to comment on **Anwar**’s detailed statement. Calum Steele, its general secretary, said: “The SPF is as eager as anyone for the outcome of the circumstances surrounding the death of **Sheku** Bayou to be made known.

“Reacting to snippets of information that may or may not be true whilst an investigation is under way is not in anyone’s best interests.”

A PIRC spokesman said the commission was carrying out an extensive investigation. “We fully empathise with the deceased’s family at this very difficult time and their need for answers in relation to the circumstances surrounding the death of **Sheku Bayoh** on 3 May 2015,” he said. “For that reason, it is only right that such serious matters are given careful consideration.”

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