Equalities watchdog opens inquiry into mental health deaths

Campaigners welcome the move but urge commission to ensure race is at the top of the national agenda

Written By: Elizabeth Pears, Posted on: 22/06/2014

THE EQUALITY and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has opened an inquiry into the 'non-natural deaths' of adults with mental health conditions in order to prevent future loss of life.

It will focus on suicide, homicide, unknown and accidental deaths of people in psychiatric hospitals, prison and police custody in England and Wales.

The inquiry will examine how well these institutions comply with their obligation under the Human Rights Act to protect everyone's right to life using evidence from 2010 to 2013. It will include cases such as Kingsley Burrell, 29, of Birmingham and 25-year-old Merseyside man Jacob Michaels who died after being tasered by officers in 2011. Both men were detained under the Mental Health Act.

Most recently, there was the death of Leon Briggs, 38, of Luton, who also fell ill and died in November 2013 after being detained by police officers allegedly while suffering a mental health crisis.

EHRC chief executive Mark Hammond said: "Despite efforts by the various authorities to prevent deaths of people in psychiatric hospitals, prisons and police custody, every year there are preventable deaths.

LESSONS

"We want to work with all the organisations involved to make sure the lessons of previous tragedies are indeed being learnt."

Official figures show there were 215 prison deaths last year – the highest number to date. Of that figure, 74 were suicides.

There were 98 'non-natural' deaths of people detained in psychiatric hospitals and almost half of those who died in police custody in 2012/13 had mental health conditions.

This inquiry will consider the impact ethnicity – as well as other protected characteristics such as gender and sexual orientations – has on the deaths.

The UK's African Caribbean community are 50 per cent more likely to be referred to mental health services through the police than other ethnicities even though there is not a higher rate of mental illness in this group.

The issue was highlighted by Conservative MP Charles Walker who in December 2013 called a parliamentary debate on black deaths in custody.

Campaign group Black Mental Health UK (BHM UK) welcomed the announcement but said the inquiry must ensure that race was given the attention it deserved.

Director Matilda MacAttram said: "The issue of the treatment of people in relation to race and ethnicity needs to be prioritised in this inquiry if it is to bring about the wholesale transformative change that is needed in many of the practices that take place in these settings."

ACTORS

She added: "There is a clear need for thorough and objective scrutiny of the factors driving the disproportionate numbers of black people subject to detention under the Mental Health Act, as well as the lethal levels of force that has been used against this group, which has led to far too many high profile preventable fatalities."

Hammond added: "The protections of equality law and human rights are for everyone and the Commission's remit gives us powers to bring together different organisations to try and ensure we all do everything possible to prevent future deaths."

The EHRC will work closely with HM Inspectorates of Prisons and Constabulary, the Care Quality Commission and other relevant organisations.

It will accept evidence within the scope of the inquiry's Terms of Reference and speak with people working in the three sectors to find out their views on the protection of detained adults with mental health conditions.

A report on the findings will be published in spring 2015, with recommendations for action needed by relevant bodies.

Earlier this month, the Met Police announced mental health teams will be provided in a number of its custody suites.

Full coverage is expected to be rolled out by the end of 2014. The move followed an Independent Commission on Mental Health, chaired by Lord Victor Adebowale.