

Minutes of the Fifth Ordinary Meeting

Held on Thursday 23rd January 2020

Joint Meeting with the Merseyside Medico Legal Society

'Learning From Mass Casualty Events: What Can We Do Better?'

Mr Elkan Abrahamson, Director, Jackson Lees, Liverpool

Mr Elkan Abrahamson, Director of Jackson Lees Solicitors, Liverpool has considerable experience in the legal aspects of mass casualty events. He began by touching on the Birmingham Pub Bomb Inquest and the Manchester Arena Inquiry. An inquest is inquisitorial and not adversarial and the legal test to hold an inquest is a death that is violent, unnatural, the cause is unknown, or died in detention. He then expanded on the Hillsborough inquests. The first in 1989 under Dr Carl Popper was at a time when there was no legal aid for families, no process of discovery and no disclosure of evidence. The inquest was broken down into brief 1-2 hour mini inquests for each of the then 95 deaths at that time, followed by an overall generic inquest of the event. The subsequent Taylor inquiry was critical of the quality of police evidence and concerned about obstructiveness among the higher levels in the police. So far Hillsborough has cost in excess of £100 million in legal costs and remains the subject of ongoing criminal investigation.

Suggestions to improve such processes include no fault compensation (although the Home Office isn't keen), position statements to narrow the issues, costs positions (inquests historically had no public funding), better control over the extent of police funding. Grenfell and Manchester Arena are inquiries and not inquests. Inquiries are necessary when there are security services involved and concern justice, accountability, responsibility, prevention but not financial damages. They aim to prevent cover up when military and judicial organisations are trained to protect each other. Following Hillsborough the Public Authorities Accountability Bill is still before Parliament which hopefully will improve such future investigations.

Jason Wong, Consultant and Senior Lecturer in Plastics, Reconstructive and Trauma Surgery, University of Manchester

Mr Wong began by explaining his background, training and research interests in plastics and reconstructive surgery. He is part of the Manchester Major Trauma Team. On the night of 22nd May 2017 he wasn't on call but was at home in Manchester City Centre when he heard the bomb explode at the Arena. He immediately went to Manchester Royal Infirmary to assist. A major incident was declared at 22.32, all live casualties had been cleared from the arena by 02.40 and the major incident declared over by 05.00. The majority of the surviving casualties had limb injuries and so there was considerable need for plastic surgical input, extensive use of artificial tendons, nerve repairs and vascular reconstructions, leaving many victims with lifelong life changing injuries and psychological problems. Even one year later many victims were still in wheelchairs or on crutches.

This led to the creation of the Manchester Institute of Health and Performance based on the science base and sports traditions in Manchester, devising programmes of ongoing reconstruction and rehabilitation. About 50% of the 120 seriously injured survivors (who had come from across the country) returned to Manchester to consider this programme and 25 signed up to the protocol. The measured metrics of rehabilitation demonstrated significant performance gains (both physical and psychological) in the months thereafter demonstrating the benefits of the multidisciplinary collaborative approach continuing even a year after the incident.

Mr G Poston