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Can death in police cells be prevented?

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Unexpected deaths in police cells are always tragic for the kin and custodial officers, but may also cause several problems both in a local society as well as in a larger community/country. Thus minimizing the number of deaths in police custody is desirable in many countries for obvious reasons. One of the aims of my research has been to find and compare death rates in police cells from as many countries as possible. However, as only a few reports have been published in medical literature, I searched for such reports in other databases using google, and even google translate. I found, only few reports on death rates from 15-16 different countries and the death rates varied between 0.14 deaths to 4-5 (and even higher) deaths per million inhabitants per year. The methodological difficulties in obtaining these death rates and the methodological differences between the reports as well as cultural and organizational differences between countries make it very difficult to compare death rates between countries. In 2002, a project was initiated in Norway aiming at reducing deaths in police cells. During the 90's, a mean of 4 persons died each year. 81% of the deaths happened in persons arrested for drunkenness. In 1/3 of all deaths, alcohol intoxication was the only cause of death. The project then recommended that a doctor should examine all persons before they were being placed in a cell if they were considered unable to take care of themselves. The intention was that dead drunk persons should not be placed in police cells, but, preferably, in a health facility unit. In 2013, we again investigated all deaths in Norwegian police cells during the previous 10 years period and compared with numbers from the first period (the 90's). In the second period a mean of 1.1 deaths occurred each year in the police cells. The total death rate was reduced from 0.83 deaths per million inhabitants per year in the first period to 0.20 in the second period. Deaths caused by alcohol intoxication, including cerebral traumas in drunken persons, had almost been eliminated (one death in the second period). The most common cause of deaths in Norwegian police cells in period two was mixed intoxications (6 deaths during the second period) and suicides (3 deaths).

Biography

Willy Aasebo is a Specialist in Internal Medicine and Nephrology and Leader of section of Nephrology (Medical Department), Akershus University Hospital, Norway. He has published a few scientific articles about alcohol intoxication, deaths in police cells and some nephrological topics including transplantation.

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