

Grieving Jews and Muslims rail at 'callous' coroner

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A senior coroner is facing calls to resign and the threat of a second judicial review over complaints about her handling of burial requests from Jewish and Muslim families.

Judaism and Islam both teach that a body should be buried as soon as possible after death, often on the same day, and also state that a body should not be cut open in an "invasive" examination.

Mary Hassell, senior coroner for inner north London, has been involved in disputes over her decision not to give priority where relatives require a swift burial for religious reasons, and to refuse less invasive post-mortem examinations in certain cases. Her jurisdiction covers the boroughs of Camden, Islington, Hackney and Tower Hamlets, home to some of Britain's largest Jewish and Muslim communities.

Ms Hassell has stated that "no death reported to my office will be prioritised over any other because of the religion of the deceased or family". A lawyer acting for bereaved families said that

she operated a first-come, first-served service even when those at the head of the list had no desire for an immediate burial.

Ministry of Justice guidance says that coroners should "take account where possible of...traditions and religious requirements". Mark Lucraft, QC, the chief coroner, assured the justice secretary last year that his office was working to comply with "two main religious requirements; avoidance where possible of so-called invasive post-mortem examinations and early burial".

Many Jews believe that the body should be watched over until it is buried, but it is not possible for relatives to do so in hospital mortuaries. Ms Hassell said in 2015 that, in cases requiring an inquest, Jewish relatives could hold the body at a community funeral home but revoked this decision last year after a dispute with one family. She is also understood to have declined to set up an out-of-hours service, which means that families bereaved at a weekend can wait days for a body to be released.

In 2014 two Jewish families obtained emergency court injunctions to pre-

vent Ms Hassell from ordering an invasive post mortem. In both cases electronic scans ascertained the cause of death.

Ms Hassell's decision in the second case was subject to a judicial review in 2015. In what was seen as a landmark judgment, Mr Justice Mitting ruled that she had made a "flawed" decision.

Abdul Hai, a Labour member of Camden council's cabinet, has called for Ms Hassell to resign or to be moved to an area with "less diversity". He said yesterday: "We need a coroner that understands the religious and cultural needs of residents."

Trevor Asserson, a solicitor who rep-

resented the family in the 2015 judicial review, said that he was applying for a second. He said: "Mary Hassell's conduct has so consistently upset the people she serves that one must wonder if she is suited to the post she holds."

The Times received no response from Ms Hassell's office yesterday. St Pancras coroner's court has said previously that it would be

Mary Hassell was found to have made a "flawed" decision

"incompatible with her judicial role" to comment.

In a letter last week, Ms Hassell said that she was "acutely conscious" of Jewish and Muslim teachings and said: "I always take these into account in my decisions [but] there is a difference between being sensitive to faith and prioritising one person over another because of their religion."

A spokesman for the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office confirmed that it was considering complaints against Ms Hassell.



TMS

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Noble ears get a blast of blue

Hansard is now an obscene publication. Today's copy of Westminster's official report carries what is believed to be the first deliberate use of the "c word" in parliament, spoken by Baroness Jenkin of Kennington in a debate on the abuse of politicians. With two bishops in front of her and after a warning to "block your ears" at her unparliamentary language, she spoke of how one candidate had been met every morning by Momentum activists who shouted "c**ing Tory c**" at her. Unlike us, *Hansard* printed it unasterisked. The only c words that appear in its archive are typos, including one in 1861 when an MP said that c** is "the cause of disunion in the United States". He probably meant "cant", or perhaps it wasn't a typo and the speaker just didn't like Lincoln.

Jenkin also spoke about social media, a concept not fully understood by all her fellow peers. "When talking about Twitter with a colleague the other day, he asked how many followers he had," she said. "I had to explain that, as he didn't have a Twitter account, he didn't actually have any."

PRESIDENCY ON A PLATE

Oprah Winfrey has done well out of speculation that she may run for the White House in 2020. After her speech at the Golden Globes on Sunday, shares in WeightWatchers, in which she has a 10 per cent stake, rose by about 12 per cent, netting her some £26 million. And I thought WeightWatchers was meant to help you to lose pounds. The next presidential election could pitch the dieting Winfrey against a man who eats only McDonald's. Usually



PATRICK KIDD

politicians compete for voters' hearts and minds. Now they are after their stomachs as well.

"Back at work and feeling undervalued?" asked a tweet from the official BBC account yesterday. "Not being paid what you're worth?" It then linked to a Woman's Hour video on how to ask for a pay rise. Oddly, the tweet was soon removed. Perhaps all the clicks from BBC staff were slowing down its servers.

HAIR-RAISING ANTICLIMAX

There are plenty of glum faces around Westminster after the reshuffle. Nick Boles, however, is just delighted to be back at work after recovering from cancer for the second time. The former skills minister's only disappointment is that his hair, which fell out during treatment, has not returned in a more exotic style. "If you have chemotherapy it can grow back very different from what it was before," Boles, below, says. "I was hoping for a mop of blond curls."

Epiphany was marked, as usual, last week with a Eucharist at the Chapel Royal, where gold, frankincense and myrrh were offered on behalf of the Queen by Air Vice-Marshal David Hobart and Brigadier Jonathan Bourne-May, both gentlemen ushers. Charles Moore, a scholarly columnist, wonders in *The Spectator* why only two wise men were asked to perform the work of three. "Defence cuts?" he suggests.

ST PETER'S GATED COMMUNITY

Our series of inappropriate signs about death reminded Paul Davis of when he was seeking a retirement home for his mother. "I thought I'd found the perfect place," he says, "until she pointed out the address: St Peter's Close." Andy Banks, however, was reassured by a sign in a Blackburn car park that read: "Paradise Lane. Long stay only."



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