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- Skip
- Skip
- Skip
- Skip



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- Jobs
- Cars
- Homes
- Classified (new)
- Services

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- World
- Politics
- Property
- Health
- Education
- Business
- Environment
- Technology
- Video
- Family Notices
- Crime Map
- Sunday Life
- The CT

heard.

Two or three heavy kicks or punches to the head could have caused the brain damage that led to Robert Hamill's death, a senior pathologist told the hearing in Belfast.

The public inquiry has been set up to investigate claims that four police officers looked on as a gang subjected the 25-year-old to a sustained and frenzied beating in Portadown town centre more than 10 years ago.

However, Northern Ireland State Pathologist professor Jack Crane said it was possible Mr Hamill's fatal injuries were sustained very quickly and with relatively few blows.

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The length of the assault will be key to investigating allegations the four Royal Ulster Constabulary officers could have intervened but failed to do so.

What are these?

Mr Hamill, a father of three, died in hospital 11 days after he was attacked while on a night out with friends in April 1997. No one has ever been convicted of his murder.

Professor Crane, who conducted the post-mortem examination, found the cause of death to be Traumatic Diffuse Axonal Injury (TDAI), which is a tearing or shearing injury caused by the brain rotating within the skull as a result of a high impact.

"Lots of people are kicked in the head and survive so the amount of force required to cause TDAI and the amount of force required to cause unconsciousness needs to be severe," he said.

But the professor said that did not necessarily mean Mr Hamill sustained numerous blows.

"The more blows the more likely there will be an axonal injury but even a relatively small number of blows, if they were of sufficient force, could have caused severe TDAI," he said.

He told the inquiry panel that there were relatively few external injuries on Mr Hamill when he examined him, with evidence of only three specific wounds on the head and some bruising on the abdomen and left arm.

"In fatal assaults we deal with we would normally expect a lot more in external injuries," he said.

"But it has been recognised that you can have a person who has very little in the way of external injuries but has very severe internal injuries.

"So normally in assaults we may expect to see more injuries but it doesn't surprise me that there were so few (in this case)."

Charles Adair QC, counsel representing a number of the officers at the centre of the allegations, put it to Professor Crane that there was no evidence to suggest Mr Hamill had sustained any more than two or three blows to the head.

"Yes, I think that's right," he replied.

Mr Adair then asked whether the TDAI injury could have been inflicted in a period of seconds.

"Yes, it could," answered the professor.

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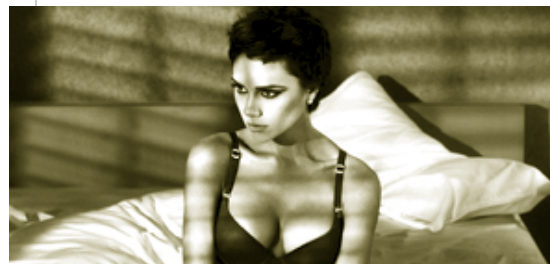
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