

The foul smell in Suhakam's report on deaths in police lockups Tears flowed hot down my cheeks a few days before Raya. It happened while I was speaking with a senior lawyer, M Visvanathan. We were speaking about the case of Mohd Fadzrin Zaini, who died in police custody in November 2019.

I cried when he told me Fadzrin's father, 57-years, had just died. He died not knowing what led to the death of his son in the Kepala Batas lockup.

With hot, wet cheeks, I remembered another father. His son, Syed Azlan, died after receiving 61 wounds while in police custody. Azlan's father, aged 73-years, died without seeing anyone convicted for causing the death of his son in November 2014.

Social media is abuzz with the deaths of Ganapathy, 40-years, and Sivabalan, 43-years, in police custody. The tears of family members are in the spotlight. The police are in the spotlight. Politicians and NGOs are responding to the spotlight. All good. We must care.

But it's a bit like the man who was seen one evening looking for something under a street-lamp. Asked what he was doing, he said he was looking for his wallet. Asked how he lost his wallet, he said he lost it on the path home from the pub. Asked why he was looking for his wallet under the street-lamp, he said "because it's dark everywhere else."

Those who "want justice" appear to be looking mostly at the cops in Gombak, where both Ganapathy and Sivabalan died. They should look at a longer path. They should look for the root causes of deaths in custody. One of the root causes is foul smell.

In 2016, Suhakam published its 2-year study on lock-up conditions and factors contributing to deaths in custody ([link](#)).

Tears flowed down my cheeks as I read it yesterday, over three hours. Here, I'll tell you a dozen things I learned from it, focusing only on smell.

One, foul smell is the operative word for describing the environment in most lockups.

Two, the foul smell comes from non-existent or broken ventilation systems.

Three, the foul smell comes from lack of provisions for cleaning the lockups.

Four, the foul smell comes from unwashed bodies. Detainees are not given toiletries, not even toothbrushes. Why? Because they may use them to harm themselves or others.

Five, the foul smell comes from unwashed prison attire. Some detainees, when accepted in the lockup, are given unwashed clothes used by other detainees. Generally, 'washed' attire is given to detainees once a week.

Six, the foul smell comes from the attire worn by detainees. In many lockups, the sentries do the laundry. The report includes a photo of one (domestic) washing machine, and a clothes horse used for drying.

Seven, the foul smell comes from overflowing toilets and drains. The situation is worse during the rainy season.

Eight, cops at the local level don't have control over maintenance of the lockups. Repairs and servicing are handled, ever so slowly, centrally.

Nine, the foul smell comes from severe overcrowding at many of the lockups, especially immediately after an 'operation' is carried out to nab suspected offenders.

Ten, the foul smell is one of the principal reasons why lockup sentries don't do their patrol rounds. They can't stand the smell and they fear being exposed to it will make them and their own families sick.

Eleven, the foul smell is one of the reasons cops won't give emergency medical attention to detainees. They won't even touch them, let alone take them to hospital in their own cars – often the only transport available.

Twelve, the foul smell hardens and dehumanizes cops who work in lockups.

Reading the report has helped me understand one of the great mysteries about deaths in police lockups. What is that mystery? It is the fact that the police cooperate when Suhakam asks to investigate a lockup death. The cops even give Suhakam copies of reports and damning videos!

Why don't the cops say – as they did when Suhakam investigated the disappearances of Amri Che Mat and Raymond Koh – that the death is the subject of an ongoing investigation, and so they can't share information such as videos, photos and sketches? Why?

I think the cops cooperate with Suhakam in cases of lockup deaths because they are also crying. Crying for conditions in the lockups to be fixed. Crying for the daily harm to their physical and mental health to end. Crying for the searing of their consciences to end.

If you are in the spotlight generated by the deaths in custody of Ganapathy and Sivabalan, please, speak of the foul smell in lockups. Speak of how this dehumanizes the men in blue, causes them immense stress, and may well lead them to do things which they regret.

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<https://write2rest.blogspot.com/2021/05/the-foul-smell-in-suhakams-report-on.html>