



MAGISTRATES COURT of TASMANIA

CORONIAL DIVISION

Record of Investigation into Death (Without Inquest)

*Coroners Act 1995
Coroners Rules 2006
Rule 11*

I, Olivia McTaggart, Coroner, having investigated the death of Rebecca Jayne Eirth

Find, pursuant to Section 28(1) of the Coroners Act 1995, that

- a) The identity of the deceased is Rebecca Jayne Eirth;
- b) Ms Eirth died unintentionally as a result of drug toxicity in the circumstances described in this finding;
- c) The cause of death was combined drug (alprazolam and methadone) toxicity; and
- d) Ms Eirth died between 3 and 6 December 2020 at Hobart, Tasmania.

In making the above findings, I have had regard to the evidence gained in the comprehensive investigation into Ms Rebecca Jayne Eirth's death. The evidence includes:

- The police report of death for the coroner;
- Opinion of the Forensic pathologist regarding cause of death;
- Toxicology report of Forensic Science Service Tasmania;
- Certificate of Analysis of substances found at the scene of death;
- Tasmanian Health Service and Glenorchy Medical Centre records for Ms Eirth;
- Affidavits of family members and friends of Ms Eirth and witnesses to the circumstances surrounding death; these sworn by Michelle Eirth, Ellie Lang, Elizabeth Douglas, Jamie Binns, Zebedee Broomhall, Karan Gillie, and Daniel Knowles;
- Affidavits of investigating and attending Police officers, together with forensic photographs and body-worn camera footage;
- Pharmaceutical Services Branch records for Ms Eirth;
- Pharmacist's dispensing records; and
- Tasmania Police information, Common Ground swipe access records and mobile phone examination.

Rebecca Jayne Eirth was born on 18 May 1988 and was 32 years of age at the time of her death. Ms Eirth never married and had no children. Both her parents died when she was a child. For much of her childhood she lived with her cousins. However, she spent several years living in foster care at the Clarendon Children's Home. In that institution, she became close to another child, Elizabeth Douglas. Ms Eirth and Ms Douglas continued to remain close friend until Ms Eirth's death.

It appears from the evidence that when Ms Eirth was about 16 years of age, she commenced using some illicit drugs. When she was 18 years of age and attending Hobart College, Ms Eirth engaged in regular illicit drug use, including smoking cannabis and using amphetamines.

In late 2007, Ms Eirth commenced a relationship with Daniel Knowles and they resided together in Kingston. Mr Knowles was known to be a heavy drug user. In this relationship, Ms Eirth's drug habit further increased and she became a heavy user of methamphetamine ("Ice"). The relationship was violent, with Mr Knowles allegedly the aggressor on most occasions. There were also seven recorded family violence incidents with the police from 2008 to 2019, with family violence orders made protecting each of them at different times. Their relationship was said to have ended in 2016, although the evidence indicates that they maintained in contact to a degree until Ms Eirth's death.

In 2012, Ms Eirth suffered injuries as a result of a motor vehicle crash and subsequently became addicted to the pain medication prescribed to her.

Over the years, Ms Eirth made attempts at drug rehabilitation. Her medical records indicate that she was first prescribed methadone in 2010 and subsequently was placed on the opioid pharmacotherapy program, with methadone being prescribed regularly to her until her death.

In 2012, Ms Eirth moved into a supported housing complex, Common Ground, located in Hobart city. She lived by herself within an apartment in the complex and had a pet dog, Dexter. It is evident that Ms Eirth was extremely attached to Dexter.

Whilst living at Common Ground, Ms Eirth continued to use drugs and prescription medication illicitly. This fact was also known by Common Ground staff.

Ms Eirth had an extensive criminal history from 2005 to 2018, including offences involving illicit drugs, violence, dishonesty, firearms and driving offences. In 2018, she was charged with wounding, assault and attempting to interfere with a witness. It was alleged that Mr Knowles was a co-offender. Ms Eirth was due to appear in the Hobart Supreme Court in February 2021 but died before that appearance.

Circumstances of Death

In the months leading up to her death, Common Ground staff and residents noticed that Ms Eirth's drug use had increased and she was believed to be using fentanyl, Xanax (alprazolam) and methamphetamine in the several months before her death. Ms Eirth had disclosed to one of the residents of Common Ground that she had been spending approximately \$1500 per fortnight on Xanax. One resident had observed her in an apparently decreased state of awareness, likely as a result of drug ingestion, in the week before her death.

On 3 December 2020, Ms Eirth last entered her room at Common Ground at 10.34am, as recorded by the room key swipe card records and CCTV footage. At some point subsequently on this day, another resident, Zebedee Broomhall, placed a bowl of dog food outside Ms Eirth's door for her dog. On 5 December 2020, Mr Broomhall observed the food was still in this location. The food had been left untouched the following day, which was unusual, and so Mr Broomhall raised his concerns with Mr Binns.

On 6 December 2020, Mr Binns (shortly after the notification by Mr Broomhall) entered Ms Eirth's room using his staff access card. He observed Dexter come to the door and saw Ms Eirth on the floor next to the couch, unresponsive. Her head was between her arms and her face was black. Mr Binns believed she was deceased and called Ambulance Tasmania. Paramedics attended the scene and confirmed that Ms Eirth was deceased.

Investigation

Police officers attended the scene and observed Ms Eirth in a crouched position with her head and hands on the floor facing downwards. She had multiple needle marks around her body. On the couch next to her was drug paraphernalia consisting of a number of syringes containing liquid and butterfly clips. There was also a large amount of empty pill containers and bottles of methadone throughout the unit. There was also a plastic bag containing an unknown white powder.

It was established through CCTV footage and swipe card records that no other person entered or exited the apartment between the time Ms Eirth entered at 10.34 am on 3 December 2020 and until she was found deceased by Mr Binns on 6 December 2020.

The scene of her death was consistent with a drug overdose with no suspicious circumstances evident to the attending officers.

After autopsy, the forensic pathologist, Dr Christopher Lawrence, concluded that Ms Eirth died of alprazolam (Xanax) and methadone intoxication. In coming to this conclusion, he relied upon analysis of her post-mortem blood sample which detected significant levels of

these substances in her system. I accept his conclusion and find that she died of the effects of injecting a large quantity of illicit drugs.

I note that the contents of one syringe found at the scene was analysed by the Forensic Science Service Tasmania and was found to contain alprazolam. The contents of the other syringe was found to be negative for common drugs. I cannot discount that an unknown toxic drug (not part of the existing screening tests) was also injected by Ms Eirth and contributed to her death.

Comments and Recommendations

I find that Ms Eirth's death as a result of drug toxicity was not intentional on her part. There is no evidence at all that it was an act of suicide. Unfortunately, her death was the result of her severe drug addiction which she was not able to overcome.

I add that, after considering the evidence, no issues arise regarding the prescribing or dispensing of methadone or other substances to Ms Eirth by her treating health professionals. The evidence indicates appropriate prescribing of methadone, with limited takeaway doses, and that she was not prescribed alprazolam at all. It is clear upon the evidence that Ms Eirth sourced her drugs illegally and had done so for many years. Her death could not have been reasonably prevented.

The circumstances of Ms Eirth's death are not such as to require me to make any comments or recommendations pursuant to section 28 of the *Coroners Act 1995*.

I convey my sincere condolences to the family and loved ones of Ms Eirth.

Dated: 29 September 2022 at Hobart Coroners Court in the State of Tasmania.

Olivia McTaggart
Coroner