



MAGISTRATES COURT of TASMANIA

CORONIAL DIVISION

Record of Investigation into Death (Without Inquest)

Coroners Act 1995

Coroners Rules 2006

Rule 11

I, Simon Cooper, Coroner, having investigated the death of Joanne Dulcie Cooper¹

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

- a) The identity of the deceased is Joanne Dulcie Cooper;
- b) Ms Cooper died as a result of injuries sustained in a motor vehicle collision on Tea Tree Road, Tea Tree on 21 July 2021. The accident occurred when the Hyundai Getz hatch driven by Ms Cooper crossed into the wrong lane and collided with an Isuzu FTR Rigid truck travelling in the opposite direction. It seems likely that Ms Cooper fell asleep at the wheel of her vehicle;
- c) The cause of Ms Cooper's death was brain, chest, abdominal and pelvic injuries; and
- d) Ms Cooper died aged 41 years on 22 July 2020 at the Royal Hobart Hospital, Tasmania.

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

- Police Report of Death for the Coroner;
- Tasmanian Health Service – Death Report to Coroner;
- Affidavits establishing life extinct and identity;
- Report – Forensic Science Service Tasmania;
- Report – Dr Andrew Reid, Forensic Pathologist;
- Records – Ambulance Tasmania;

¹ Ms Cooper and I are not related.

- Medical Records – Tasmanian Health Service;
- Affidavit – Mr Jason Hardy, Transport Inspector;
- Affidavit – Mr Wayne Rice, Safety and Compliance Officer – National Heavy Vehicle Regulator;
- Affidavit – Mr Roger Watson, sworn 30 July 2020;
- Affidavit – Mr Anthony Percy, sworn 20 August 2020;
- Affidavit – Mr Craig Harback, sworn 21 July 2020;
- Affidavit – Mr David Blackwell, sworn 29 July 2020 (and sketch map);
- Affidavit – Ms Georgia Cooper, sworn 26 August 2020;
- Affidavit – Ms Christine Swan, sworn 30 July 2020;
- Affidavit – Mr Zack Swan, sworn 29 January 2021;
- Affidavit – Mr Donald Nation, sworn 29 August 2020;
- Affidavit – Acting Sergeant Skye Carey, sworn 22 July 2020;
- Affidavit – Constable Jared Gowen, sworn 9 September 2021;
- Affidavit – First Class Constable Tania Curtis APM, sworn 18 September 2021;
- Affidavit – Senior Constable Allison Champion, sworn 29 September 2021;
- Affidavit – Ms Christine Swan, sworn 15 January 2021;
- Affidavit – Mr Geoffrey Swan, sworn 15 January 2021;
- Blood analysis result – Mr Roger Watson;
- Collision Analysis Report, November 2020;
- Medical Records – Dr Krishna, General Practitioner Lindisfarne;
- Patient Script History Report – Joanne Cooper;
- Medication Summary – Ms Christine Swan;

- Medication Summary – Mr Geoffrey Swan;
- Bureau of Meteorology weather observations information;
- Scene photographs;
- Vehicle Registration and licensing details; and
- Forensic evidence, road crash data and telephone records.

Ms Cooper had a well-documented and lengthy history of drug abuse. She had been a participant in the opioid treatment pharmacotherapy program for approximately five years before her death.

At about 3.00pm on 21 July 2020, Ms Cooper left her residence at Buckland to drive to New Norfolk to pick-up her son. Family members describe her as appearing drowsy and sleepy during the day prior to her setting out for New Norfolk.

As she drove in a general westerly direction on Tea Tree Road, Tea Tree, it appears that Ms Cooper fell asleep at the wheel of her vehicle. She drifted into the incorrect lane and collided with an Isuzu truck driven by Mr Roger Watson. The collision occurred wholly in Ms Cooper's incorrect lane. Evidence at the scene demonstrates that Mr Watson attempted to manoeuvre his truck so as to avoid the collision, but was unable to do so.

The airbags in Ms Cooper's vehicle deployed. She was wearing a seatbelt. Nonetheless, she suffered catastrophic multiple injuries.

Emergency services were quickly on the scene. Ms Cooper, critically injured, was airlifted from the scene to the Royal Hobart Hospital.

Upon arrival at the Royal Hobart Hospital, her injuries were assessed as being so serious as to be incompatible with life. Following consultation with family members, life-support was discontinued the following day and Ms Cooper died.

Experienced Forensic Pathologist, Dr Andrew Reid, performed an autopsy. He found that she had suffered multiple injuries to the brain, chest, abdomen and pelvis. Toxicological analysis of samples upon her admission to hospital indicated the presence of multiple drugs in Ms Cooper's body, including the antidepressant amitriptyline and diazepam. Ms Cooper was not prescribed diazepam at the time of her death. Subsequent investigation was unable to determine the source of that drug.

I am satisfied on the evidence that it certainly contributed to the happening of the crash.

I am satisfied that Ms Cooper died as a consequence of unsustainable injuries suffered in the motor vehicle accident on 21 July 2020 on Tea Tree Road.

The driver of the truck, Mr Watson, underwent normal post accident testing. No alcohol or illicit drugs were detected as having been present in his body at the time of the happening of the crash. His vehicle was examined by a Transport Inspector who provided a report in which he expressed the opinion, which I accept, that Mr Watson's vehicle was roadworthy at the time of the happening of the crash.

Ms Cooper's car was identified as having minor defects prior to the crash. However, I am satisfied that those defects (principally in relation to tyre tread) did not cause or contribute to the happening of the crash.

Weather conditions and the road surface did not cause or contribute to the happening of the crash either.

In summary, I am satisfied on the evidence that the accident which claimed Ms Cooper's life was the result of her most likely falling asleep at the wheel of her vehicle and crossing on to the incorrect side of the road into the path of a truck.

It seems likely that the drowsiness which directly contributed to the happening of the crash was attributable, at least in part, to her use of non-prescription diazepam.

Comments and Recommendations

The circumstances of Ms Cooper'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 Cooper.

Dated 10 March 2022 at Hobart in the State of Tasmania.

Simon Cooper

Coroner