



# MAGISTRATES COURT of TASMANIA

## CORONIAL DIVISION



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### Record of Investigation into Death (Without Inquest)

*Coroners Act 1995  
Coroners Rules 2006  
Rule 11*

I, Rod Chandler, Coroner, having investigated the death of Esther Grace Van Galen

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

- a) The identity of the deceased is Esther Grace Van Galen;
- b) Esther was born in Launceston on 29 April 2016 and was aged 7 weeks and 2 days;
- c) Esther died on 19 June 2016 at Longford, Tasmania; and
- d) The cause of Esther's death was sudden infant death while bed-sharing.

#### **Background**

Esther was the first child of Talida Jenkins and Shane Van Galen. She was born at 33 weeks gestation by caesarean section. Her birth was brought forward because of concerns that she was not putting on weight. At birth she weighed 1.7kg and was not released from hospital until 1 June 2016 when she was considered sufficiently robust to be cared for at home. She was being breast fed on demand.

On 16 June Talida took Esther to the Launceston Medical Centre for her 6 week post-natal check. She was seen by Dr Clare Cerchez. The notes show that a comprehensive examination was carried out and no issues were identified. Dr Cerchez has recorded "*well healthy baby*". Esther was inoculated against whooping cough.

#### **Circumstances Surrounding the Death**

Talida and Shane spent the evening of Saturday 18 June 2016 watching sport on television. Each was seated on separate couches. Shortly after midnight Talida breastfed Esther. After this both parents fell asleep. Talida was still holding Esther in her arms.

At around 4.00am Shane woke up. The television was still on. He got up intending to get a drink. As he walked passed Talida he tapped her on the shoulder to tell her that he was going to bed. Talida woke. When she looked at Esther she realised that she was not breathing. She immediately lay Esther on the floor and began CPR. Shane rang 000 for an ambulance. A first response crew promptly attended and continued CPR. A second ambulance with paramedics followed. Despite their resuscitative attempts Esther could not be revived. She was declared deceased at 4.47am.

## **Investigation**

Tasmania Police attended the scene including detectives from Northern CIB. A Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy Checklist was completed. Forensic examinations were undertaken and photographs taken. Both Talida and Shane were interviewed. Police were satisfied that there were not any suspicious circumstances attaching to the death.

A Post-Mortem Examination was carried out by State Forensic Pathologist, Dr Christopher Lawrence. There was no evidence that Esther had suffered violence or injury. Dr Lawrence observes: "*Bed sharing on (a) couch with mother is probably an unsafe sleeping environment for a small premature infant.*" In Dr Lawrence's opinion the cause of Esther's death was sudden infant death while bed-sharing. I accept this opinion.

## **Findings, Comments and Recommendations**

The evidence clearly shows that Talida and Shane were loving and caring parents who were devoted to the wellbeing of their baby daughter during her brief life. There is nothing to suggest that a conscious decision was made by Talida to sleep on the couch with her baby and it may be that it was an accidental outcome brought about by the hour and a degree of sleep deprivation that commonly bedevils breastfeeding mothers. Nevertheless and most tragically, Esther's death again illustrates the dangers to young infants which arise from co-sleeping with an adult and it leads me to again repeat previous warnings made by myself and my colleagues against this most unwise practice.

I have decided not to hold a public inquest into this death because my investigation has been sufficient to disclose the identity of the deceased, the date, place, cause of death, relevant circumstances concerning how her death occurred and the particulars needed to register her death under the *Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1999*. I do not consider that the holding of a public inquest would elicit any significant information further to that disclosed by the investigation conducted by me. The circumstances of the death do not require me to make any further comment or to make any recommendations.

I convey my sincere condolences to Esther's family and loved ones.

**Dated:** 9 November 2018 at Hobart in the State of Tasmania.

**Rod Chandler**  
**Coroner**