



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 Melanie Sarah Cooper

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

- a) The identity of the deceased is Melanie Sarah Cooper;
- b) Mrs Cooper died of the consequences of drug use in the circumstances set out in this finding;
- c) The cause of death was embolic infarcts complicating infective endocarditis; and
- d) Mrs Cooper died 17 March 2019 in Launceston, Tasmania.

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

- The Police Report of Death for the Coroner;
- An opinion of the pathologist who conducted the autopsy;
- Toxicological testing results;
- Affidavits confirming identification and life extinct;
- Recorded police interview with William Cooper, son of Mrs Cooper;
- Recorded police interview with Stephen Smith, partner of Mrs Cooper;
- Affidavits of Michael Cooper and Samuel Cooper, sons of Mrs Cooper;
- Affidavit of Gregory Smith, brother of Stephen Smith;
- Affidavit of Aileen Smith, mother of Stephen Smith;
- Affidavit of Cheryl Holton, friend of Mrs Cooper;
- Affidavit of Edwina Butler, sister of Mrs Cooper;
- Affidavit of Angela Helps, mother of Mrs Cooper;
- Affidavit of Jason Gower, associate of Mrs Cooper;

- Affidavit of Adrian Barr, tenant of Mrs Cooper;
- Affidavit of Gloria Roberts, tenant of Mrs Cooper;
- Affidavit of Kade Duncan, neighbour of Mrs Cooper;
- Affidavits of six investigating police officers;
- Medical reports and records from Launceston General Hospital and Ambulance Tasmania;
- Phone records;
- Photographs of 18 Hazelwood Parade; and
- Medical review by Dr A J Bell, coronial medical consultant.

Background

Mrs Melanie Sarah Cooper was born in New South Wales on 17 October 1967. She was the daughter of Angela Helps and John Drew. She was aged 51 years at her death and lived in her home at Ravenswood. She was unemployed.

Mrs Cooper married Jeremy Cooper and there are three sons of the marriage – Samuel, Michael and William Cooper. Mr and Mrs Cooper divorced and subsequently Mrs Cooper commenced a significant relationship with Stephen Smith. Mrs Cooper and Mr Smith had been in a relationship for about 12 years before Mrs Cooper's death.

Mrs Cooper, William Cooper ("William") and Stephen Smith were all long term users of illicit drugs. In particular, they all injected opiates, such as morphine, intravenously.

Mrs Cooper's medical records not only describe her history of intravenous drug use but other serious and chronic conditions, indicating that she was in a very poor state of health. These conditions included chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diverticular disease, gastro-oesophageal reflux disease, depression with anxiety and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

In 2014 Mrs Cooper's father, John Drew, passed away, leaving \$900,000 to Mrs Cooper and \$100,000 to each to her sons. At about this time, Mrs Cooper's son, William, began to spend more time living with her. From this time until her death, Mrs Cooper lived at her residence in Ravenswood with William and her partner, Steven Smith. All three continued to abuse illicit drugs.

Circumstances Surrounding Death

In the three days before her death, Mrs Cooper's health deteriorated significantly. William said that her feet were swollen, that she could not breathe properly, that she suffered confusion and was losing weight. Mr Smith also said that her feet were swollen, which was unusual.

Otherwise, he did not consider her to be particularly unwell. The most credible evidence of her deterioration in physical health during those days is from Cheryl Holton, Mrs Cooper's friend. Ms Holton stated in her affidavit;

"The last time I saw Mel was on Sunday the 3rd of March 2019. I went to her house at 3 PM and Steve was home and let me in. Mel was in bed, sitting up against pillows. She was trying to wake up and was trying to talk to me, but during the next 1 ½ hours she was in and out of sleep. She was really sick and she held a syringe in her right hand. She was trying to use it, and trying to put it in her hand or close to it. I kept saying "are you right, mate", she would reply to me each time but then she would say "I can't keep my eyes open" and begin going back to sleep.

I think there was morphine in the syringe because she was sick and she didn't feel the best. I think Mel would have used Morphine three times a day or more than that.

I heard Steve say to Mel "you have already had two today". It was only 3 o'clock and I thought that was a bit too much. By 4.30pm she still had not used that morphine in the syringe even though she had tried. I was worried she was going to stab herself with the needle.

Mel had a ritual of going to the bathroom and using morphine. That was her thing. I used to be at the house when she would use morphine in the bathroom. I think she was embarrassed by using in front of me. I used to talk to her through the bathroom door, after a while I would leave her in the bathroom and catch up with her another time".

Ms Holton said that she left Mrs Cooper's residence but returned with her daughter at 5.30pm the same day to visit her. At that time, Mrs Cooper was asleep in her bedroom, with Mr Smith and William present in the house. Ms Holton did not have any contact with Mrs Cooper after that time. However, William stated that his mother remained very unwell, lethargic and spending a lot of time in bed.

On 7 March 2019 Mrs Cooper was at home with William, Mr Smith and his brother, Gregory Smith. On this day, Mr Smith stated that he made up two syringes from a brown powder that he said was either heroin or morphine. One was for himself, the other for Mrs Cooper. Mr Smith administered his syringe to himself but Mrs Cooper did not administer her syringe at that time. Both Mr Smith and William stated that they did not see Mrs Cooper administer any drugs that day.

At around lunch time, Mr Smith and Gregory Smith left the house. Mrs Cooper deteriorated, suffering from urinary and faecal incontinence as well as increased confusion and disorientation.

William told police in his interview that he suggested calling the ambulance for Mrs Cooper but that Mr Smith told him not to do so as it would upset her.

Nevertheless, at 8.12pm on that day, William called an ambulance which arrived at 8.24pm. William told ambulance paramedics that he and his mother had injected what they believed to be a morphine based compound three days before and both had experienced body-wide pain after injecting. William told the paramedics that he had ceased using the substance at that time but that his mother had used it again subsequently.

The paramedics recorded in their notes that drug paraphernalia was present through the house. Mrs Cooper was transported by ambulance to the Launceston General Hospital. She was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit where she remained unwell and suffered a falling respiratory rate. Imaging showed multiple acute cerebral infarcts (strokes) and, despite treatment over the following week, she died in hospital on 17 March 2019.

A post-mortem examination was conducted by forensic pathologist, Dr Donald Ritchey, on 20 March 2019. Dr Ritchey concluded that death was due to several embolic strokes complicating infective endocarditis caused by intravenous drug use. He also noted that a significant contributing factor to her death was her emphysema and respiratory bronchiolitis. He reported her as thin, weighing 45.5 kilograms.

Dr Ritchey observed upon Mrs Cooper widespread evidence of marked chronic intravenous drug use, including needle track scars on her forearms and calves. He also noted that toxicology testing of blood obtained from Mrs Cooper on 10 March, two days after her hospital admission, revealed no illicit drugs and only the medication given to her in hospital. Any illicit drugs used by Mrs Cooper on 7 March or previously, would likely have dissipated from her system by the time the blood sample was taken.

I accept the conclusion of Dr Ritchey regarding cause of death.

On 14 March 2019, Tasmania Police received information from an anonymous caller stating that Mrs Cooper, who was currently in hospital, may have been given a “hot shot” (a supposedly fatal dose of drugs) by her son, William. It was alleged that William had discussed his intention with a known drug dealer to whom he was indebted, with a view to repaying his debt with the inheritance from his mother after her death.

Tasmania Police then conducted a comprehensive investigation into the possibility that Mrs Cooper had been given a “hot shot”. Despite this comprehensive investigation, which included searches of premises, analysis of telephone records and interviews with numerous witnesses, there is no evidence that William or any other person administered drugs to Mrs Cooper

intending to cause her death. There is unreliable hearsay evidence that William may have spoken, possibly jokingly, about giving his mother a “hot shot” to gain money. Mrs Cooper and William had connections to the known drug dealer, Stephen Williams. There is also strong evidence that Mrs Cooper and/or William owed a large sum of money to Mr Williams. However, there is no evidence that Mr Williams and/or William were involved in administering a hot shot to Mrs Cooper to cause her death.

The evidence as a whole indicates that Mrs Cooper was addicted to opiates, which she voluntarily injected intravenously over a long period of time. By reason of her addiction, she was in very poor health. It is possible that her deterioration and death was precipitated by an episode of voluntarily injecting herself with particularly toxic opiates in the days before she was admitted to hospital. However, even with her usual pattern of drug use, her death was not unexpected.

Comments and Recommendations

The circumstances of Mrs Melanie 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 extend my appreciation to investigating officer First Class Constable Giuliano Ercole for his investigation and report. I also thank Detective Sergeant Glenn Evans for his valuable assistance.

I convey my sincere condolences to the family and loved ones of Mrs Cooper.

Dated: 23 August 2021 at Hobart Coroners Court in the State of Tasmania.

Olivia McTaggart

Coroner