



MAGISTRATES COURT *of* TASMANIA



CORONIAL DIVISION

Record of Investigation into Deaths (Without Inquest)

Coroners Act 1995 ***Coroners Rules 2006*** ***Rule 11***

These Findings have been de-identified in relation to the names of the deceased, family and friends by direction of the Coroner pursuant to s.57(1)(c) of the *Coroners Act 1995*.

I, Olivia McTaggart, Coroner, having investigated the deaths of four males, from various regions of the State of Tasmania.

Find That:

- (a) Male 'A' aged 52 died as a result of acute alcohol intoxication;
- (b) Male 'B' aged 52, died as a result of positional asphyxia induced by alcohol;
- (c) Male 'C' aged 53 died as a result of acute ethanol intoxication; and
- (d) Male "D" aged 50 , died as a result of positional asphyxia due to acute alcohol intoxication.

Comments and Recommendations:

This finding is published simultaneously with my findings into 3 other deaths. In all deaths I have found that the cause of death is either acute ethanol toxicity (alcohol poisoning) or positional asphyxia (obstructed airways). In all four most unfortunate deaths the cause of death is due directly to the ingestion of a very large quantity of alcohol on a single occasion.

Alcohol is the most widely used recreational drug in Australia. Because it is so widely used and socially acceptable in our society, alcohol is often not considered to be a 'drug',

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nor is it considered to be particularly harmful. In Australia alcohol is responsible for a considerable burden of death, disease and injury. In 2010 in Australia 5554 deaths were attributable to alcohol; an increase of 62% since the study was last undertaken a decade ago.¹

At the higher concentrations involved in single heavy drinking episodes, there is loss of critical judgment, impaired coordination and balance, decrease in activity including sedation and sleep, nausea and vomiting, reduced responsiveness and decreased intellectual performance. Such impairment can lead to dangerous situations and risk taking behaviour. In the long term the harmful effects can include physical and psychological dependence upon alcohol, organ damage and emotional problems such as depression.

Very high concentrations, such as those detected in each of the four deceased the subject of these findings, are potentially fatal. Death results from a combination of respiratory, cerebral and cardiac depression. Death can also occur in those with concentrations lower than that of these four deceased, where there is underlying cardiorespiratory disease, and those who have aspirated vomitus, or have obstructed airways due to sleep or unconsciousness.

To avoid the harmful effects of heavy drinking episodes the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends adherence to its alcohol guidelines in order to control intake of alcohol. Unfortunately, research has indicated that only 12% of the population are aware of the NHMRC guideline advisories on what constitutes 'low risk' drinking². There have also been no major Commonwealth government initiatives to raise awareness within the Australian community of these guidelines since their publication in 2009, with a view to reducing unsafe drinking and related harm.

These guidelines are available to view on the website www.nhmrc.gov.au. In general the safe drinking guidelines for the general population are, in summary, as follows:

- (a) For healthy men and women, drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day reduces the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury.
- (b) For healthy men and women, drinking no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion reduces the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion.

I recognise of course that in the case of the four deaths the subject of these findings there are complex reasons why each deceased consumed alcohol to excess; and that the solution to controlling such levels of consumption is very difficult.

¹ Alcohol's Burden of disease in Australia-Gao, Ogeil and Lloyd July 2014

² Education and Health Standing Committee Report, Parliament of Western Australia- Alcohol; Reducing the harm and curbing the culture of excess, 2011

The premature death of each of the four deceased is a loss to their family and the community, and a sad reminder of the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption.

I **recommend** that relevant State and Federal agencies develop and implement a strategy to significantly increase the awareness in the community of the NMHRC guidelines for low risk drinking, when people choose to drink.

I **recommend** that relevant State and Federal agencies consider the development of a comprehensive strategy to reduce unsafe alcohol consumption and its related harm, based on evidence.

In concluding I convey my sincere condolences to the families.

DATED: 11 November 2014 at Hobart in the state of Tasmania

Olivia McTaggart
CORONER