



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 Susan Ann Deuchar

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

- a) The identity of the deceased is Susan Ann Deuchar;
- b) Mrs Deuchar died in the circumstances set out in this finding;
- c) The cause of death was environmental heat and cold exposure with dehydration;
and
- d) Mrs Deuchar died between 10 and 15 December 2018 at Tullah, Tasmania.

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

- The Police Report of Death;
- Life extinct and identification affidavits;
- Opinion of the forensic pathologist, Dr Donald Ritchey, who conducted the autopsy;
- Ambulance Tasmania report of attendance at the scene;
- Affidavit of an intensive care paramedic attending the scene;
- Affidavit of Gabrielle Roach, Mrs Deuchar's daughter;
- Affidavit of Carl Collins, Mrs Deuchar's nephew;
- Affidavit of Selina Collins, Mrs Deuchar's niece;
- Affidavit of Thomas Deegan, Mrs Deuchar's friend;
- Affidavit of John Palmer, Mrs Deuchar's neighbour;
- Seven affidavits of officers of Tasmania Police involved in the missing person search for Mrs Deuchar;
- Crash Investigation Report by Senior Constable Adam Lloyd, crash investigator;
- Affidavit of the Forensic Services officer who attended and photographed the scene;
- Transport Inspector's report regarding the condition of Mrs Deuchar's vehicle;

- Letter provided by Dorothy Hartnett, friend of Mrs Deuchar and who reported her missing to police;
- Medical and pharmacy records, weather information and mobile phone information; and
- Tasmania Police missing persons running sheet.

Mrs Susan Ann Deuchar was born on 3 March 1946 in New South Wales to Norma and Ronald Collins and was the second of three children. Mrs Deuchar was married twice but was a widow at the time of her death. She has three children; Gabrielle, Kane and Robert (who passed away when he was 17 years of age as a result of a vehicle accident). Mrs Deuchar's working life involved a wide variety of occupations, including sales, massage therapy and naturopathy. She is described by her daughter and friends as highly intelligent, enthusiastic and curious. Mrs Deuchar moved to Queenstown in about 2014, purchased a residence there and became an active member of the community.

Mrs Deuchar's medical history was extensive and included deep vein thrombosis, osteoporosis, multiple myeloma, chronic pain, severe and chronic left knee effusion, hypercholesterolemia, hypertension and depression. In 2018 she was being actively treated with chemotherapy for multiple myeloma, bilateral macular degeneration, lumbar back pain and muscle cramps. As a result of her pre-existing conditions, Mrs Deuchar was limited in her mobility and used a cane for balance and additional support whilst walking. However, she was still independent, lived alone and took care of her own daily needs. She held a driver's licence and drove a white 2013 Hyundai i30. She was described as a careful and competent driver.

Mrs Deuchar was under the regular care of her local general practitioner, Dr Dennis Pashen. Mrs Deuchar was on a large list of medication for her various conditions which was provided by the local pharmacy in weekly blister packets. She also attended routine appointments at the West Coast Community Hospital. Although she suffered depression, there is no suggestion on the evidence that Mrs Deuchar suffered suicidal thoughts.

Circumstances of Death

On the morning of Monday 10 December 2018, Mrs Deuchar ran some errands in her car in Queenstown before returning home around midday. She then drove her nephew, Carl Collins, to his residence before informing him that she was heading to Ulverstone to attend a doctor's appointment but would be back in Queenstown in a few days.

Based upon all of the evidence in this thorough investigation, I find that Mrs Deuchar then drove towards Ulverstone. Sometime between 1.20pm and 5.48pm she was driving north on

Anthony Road, Tullah. At a curve in the road approximately 4.8 kilometres south of the intersection of Anthony Road and the Murchison Highway, Mrs Deuchar's car continued to travel in a straight line, crossing the double white lines onto the incorrect side of the road at a gentle speed. This resulted in the car travelling down an embankment on the eastern side of Anthony Road. The car stopped approximately 15 metres down the embankment and was not visible to passing motorists.

In the incident, Mrs Deuchar suffered minor injuries and, after putting the car in the 'park' gear and placing the handbrake on, she began climbing up the embankment. However, approximately three metres from the roadway, Mrs Deuchar either fell or laid down and was unable to get back up due to her pre-existing mobility issues. The evidence indicates that Mrs Deuchar made two separate calls to emergency services at 5.48pm and 5.49pm but neither call connected as there was no mobile telephone reception in the area of the crash.

Mrs Deuchar was expected to arrive at the residence of Mr Thomas Deegan, a friend, in the afternoon or evening of 10 December 2018. When she failed to arrive, Mr Deegan thought he had made a mistake with her arrival time. When she failed to arrive again on 11 December 2018 Mr Deegan attempted to contact Mrs Deuchar but his attempts were unsuccessful.

Mrs Deuchar was reported missing on Wednesday 12 December 2018 at 8.00am by Dorothy Hartnett, a long-time friend of Mrs Deuchar. Mrs Hartnett told police that Mrs Deuchar had not attended her doctor's appointment on the day before and had not been heard from since the morning of 10 December 2018.

Police officers then immediately attended Mrs Deuchar's address, determining that no one was present and there was no car at the property. Police officers attended her home several times that day, speaking to friends, relatives, neighbours and other Queenstown residents to try and ascertain her whereabouts. A "missing person report" was submitted and police conducted many checks, enquiries and searches in accordance with their protocols.

Over the course of the following two days, being 13 and 14 December 2018, the search for Mrs Deuchar and her vehicle expanded, with outlying police stations and State Emergency Services assisting with the search of all possible routes that she may have taken. A photograph was released to the media, with details of her vehicle, for state-wide distribution, asking members of the public to come forward with any information that might lead to Mrs Deuchar's location.

On Saturday 15 December 2018, a rescue helicopter was deployed after footage of Mrs Deuchar's vehicle, captured on a motorist's "dash cam", was given to police. The footage

assisted the search by providing Mrs Deuchar's direction of travel. At 10.10am Mrs Deuchar's vehicle and body were sighted down an incline to the side of Anthony Road, in the position previously described.

The two police officers who were first upon the scene determined that Mrs Deuchar was clearly deceased. Paramedics who subsequently attended confirmed that she was deceased.

Tasmania Police Crash Investigation Services and Forensic Services officers attended to assist in the investigation and to photograph and analyse the scene. It was noted by the officers that Mrs Deuchar's body was located 12 metres from her vehicle and 3 metres from the road verge but below the height of the road. Her body was lying face down and was partially obscured by the dense scrub in the area. Next to her body was a walking stick, a handbag and another blue bag. The officers investigating the scene concluded that there were no suspicious circumstances nor indications that any other person was involved in Mrs Deuchar's death.

Dr Donald Ritchey, forensic pathologist, performed an autopsy upon Mrs Deuchar. Dr Ritchey concluded, based on autopsy findings, that Mrs Deuchar had died as a result of environmental heat and cold exposure with severe dehydration. He reported that Mrs Deuchar had only mild (non-fatal) injuries from the crash, being bruises to the head and shoulder. He was of the view that such injuries were consistent with a low speed crash or, alternatively, a fall. Dr Ritchey was of the view that factors contributing to her death were severe osteoarthritis (limiting her mobility), atherosclerotic coronary vascular disease and multiple myeloma.

The toxicological evidence indicates that Mrs Deuchar did not have alcohol or illicit drugs in her system at the time of driving, only her usual prescription medications.

A very detailed crash investigation report was received for this investigation. The experienced crash investigator did not find evidence of harsh braking or steering after Mrs Deuchar started to travel down the embankment at a speed of about 30 to 45 km/h. The evidence of the Transport Inspector indicates that Mrs Deuchar's vehicle was functioning correctly, although was not deemed roadworthy due to the presence of a loose fitting aftermarket steering wheel cover. I am satisfied that this issue did not contribute to the crash.

Upon the evidence, it is most likely that Mrs Deuchar either fell asleep whilst driving, suffered a dizziness episode or had a lapse in concentration, with her vehicle then veering off the road. Although the crash likely occurred at 2.30pm on 10 December 2018, she did not make the emergency calls for another four hours. It may have been that she was not in a sufficiently conscious state during that time to be able to do so. It is likely that in the hours after her crash, she attempted to negotiate the 15 metre embankment to reach the road, using her

walking stick. However, she was not able to reach the road where she would have been visible to passing motorists. She then succumbed to hypothermia and dehydration, with the temperature overnight dropping to about 8 degrees Celsius.

It seems that Mrs Deuchar was likely deceased on 10 December 2018 (two days before she was reported as a missing person) as there were no other attempts to call emergency services from her phone and her body was in a state of decomposition when located.

Comments and Recommendations

Sadly, Mrs Deuchar would have suffered a frightening experience in the crash and in then trying to reach the road to seek help. On the evidence, a combination of several circumstances contributed to her death – Mrs Deuchar being alone in her vehicle, her loss of control, her poor medical condition, the lack of mobile phone service, and the steep and bushy road verge that obscured her vehicle and body from passing motorists. I also note that Mrs Deuchar chose to drive on Anthony Road (a “B” class road) rather than the safer Murchison Highway (an “A” class road), both of which routes would have taken about the same driving time.

Although Mrs Deuchar died before she was reported to police as a missing person, I comment that the significant efforts of officers of Tasmania Police in searching for her between 12 and 15 December 2018 are to be commended.

I extend my appreciation to investigating officer, Constable Kerri-Anne Talbot, for her investigation and report.

The circumstances of Mrs Susan Deuchar’s death are not such as to require me to make any recommendations pursuant to Section 28 of the *Coroners Act 1995*.

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

Dated: 27 July 2020 at Hobart Coroners Court in the State of Tasmania.

Olivia McTaggart
Coroner