



# MAGISTRATES COURT *of* TASMANIA

## CORONIAL DIVISION

---

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

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

I, Robert Webster, Coroner, having investigated the death of Janetta Ann Tongs

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

- a) The identity of the deceased is Janetta Ann Tongs (Mrs Tongs);
- b) Mrs Tongs died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound;
- c) Mrs Tongs' cause of death was exsanguination due to a gunshot wound to the upper left chest; and
- d) Mrs Tongs died on 9 February 2020 at Sprent, Tasmania.

#### **Introduction**

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

- The Police Report of Death for the Coroner;
- Affidavits confirming identification and life extinct;
- Affidavit of the pathologist Dr Brain;
- Affidavit of the forensic scientist Mr Neil McLachlan-Troup of Forensic Science Service Tasmania;
- Affidavit of Mr Max Tongs;
- Affidavit of Ms Jessica Thompson;
- Affidavit of Mr Michael Johnson;
- Affidavit of Mr Timothy Howe;

- Affidavit of Senior Constable Gavin Rigby;
- Affidavit of Senior Constable Simon Taylor, Ballistics Section;
- Affidavit of First-Class Constable Dean Wotherspoon;
- Medical records of Mrs Tongs obtained from the Victoria Street Clinic Ulverstone;
- Medical records of Mrs Tongs obtained from the Tasmanian Health Service (THS);
- Photographs and forensic evidence.

### **Background**

Mrs Tongs was born Janetta Ann Langmaid on 18 November 1964, at Devonport, Tasmania. At the time of her death, she was aged 55 years, was working as an aged care worker for Anglicare and she was living by herself at Sprent in Tasmania.

Mrs Tongs was born to Charles Langmaid and Wendy Jones. She spent most of her life in and around the North West region of Tasmania.

She met and married Neil Johnson, having four children with him before they separated in 1994. She met Mr Tongs whilst he was working on a farm with her father. They subsequently married in 1998. They had no children and separated six or so years before Mrs Tongs' death. Mr Tongs says he first noticed she was suffering from depression in or about 2001. When he first met her he says she was very outgoing and she enjoyed life. Mr Tongs says when they formed their relationship they "copped a bit of flack... as I had left my partner and she did too." He says for a long time their relationship was "really good." He says the thing that resulted in the end of their relationship was the fact their respective families had disowned them and this caused them to argue. This he said weighed heavily on Mrs Tongs given her own children, apart from one, had decided not to speak or have anything to do with her. Since the end of their relationship they got along better and Mr Tongs had kept in contact with Mrs Tongs and had supported her. It seems if she needed financial assistance Mr Tongs would provide it.

One of Mrs Tongs' daughters left Tasmania to live interstate. This occurred when Mrs Tongs' grandson was about 4 years of age. Mr and Mrs Tongs looked after him for a number of years. Mrs Tongs' daughter returned to Tasmania about 7 years later however her son continued to live with Mrs Tongs and had limited contact with his mother. As time passed Mrs Tongs' grandson decided he did not wish to live with his grandmother but instead he wished to live with his

mother. He therefore left his grandmother and lived with his mother until approximately a week prior to Mrs Tongs' death when he returned to live with her.

Ms Thompson and Mrs Tongs had known each other for many years. They moved to the Sprent area at around the same time and became very close friends. They would see each other every day. They therefore knew one another very well and what was going on in their respective lives. It seems from those discussions Mrs Tongs was seeing both Mr Howell and Mr Johnson in 2019 however she wanted more from a relationship than either of them was prepared to give.

In December 2019 Mrs Tongs went to Kalgoorlie in Western Australia to see her daughter. She was going to help babysit her grandchildren and she was away for about 2 weeks. Mr Tongs took her to and from the airport before and after that trip. On her return Mr Tongs says she was really happy and to him she seemed like her old self.

## Health

Mrs Tongs' records from the general practitioner cover the period from 13 May 2002 until 6 January 2020. Those records and the hospital records reveal a past history of asthma, depression, migraines, osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, diverticulitis, a vestibular schwannoma<sup>1</sup>, she had undergone a cholecystectomy<sup>2</sup> and she also had antral gastropathy<sup>3</sup>. In addition there was a diagnosis of fibromyalgia and because of radicular symptoms from the lumbar spine Mrs Tongs had undergone a number of procedures which included L5 nerve root injections and lumbar epidurals until she underwent a micro-discectomy at L4 – 5. Mrs Tongs also suffered from gastro-oesophageal reflux disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

It seems from the records Mrs Tongs sustained a number of workplace injuries which resulted in workers compensation claims. In fact it appears that at a consultation with her general practitioner on 5 August 2002 Mrs Tongs revealed that because her claim was being disputed she had tried to commit suicide 2 weeks previously. The general practitioner's records reveal stress with her daughter in 2005, stress with her son in 2006, stress over a visit to the dentist in 2008, stress at home with her partner and grandson in 2011, difficulties in fighting for custody of her grandson in 2012 and problems with both her grandson and her son in that year and with her daughter. A note for the 14 June 2018 records worsening depression since she quit smoking and from September 2018 problems in dealing with her grandson who had his own difficulties. It

---

<sup>1</sup> A benign tumour on the balance, hearing or auditory nerves.

<sup>2</sup> To remove her gallbladder.

<sup>3</sup> Damaged stomach lining of the antral portion of the stomach.

appears Mrs Tongs' cessation in smoking had led to an increase in weight of 20 kg which was lost when Mrs Tongs resumed smoking over a 12 month period. By early 2019 the records reveal she felt great and positive about life, she was going back to work and she had a new partner. In April of that year she was advised to stop smoking and an entry for 17 July 2019 noted the recent overdose caused by partnership and financial issues although by that stage she was doing well. By August she indicated a wish to cease smoking again but she was fearful of gaining weight and that had made her more depressed in the past. An attendance on 16 October 2019 noted Mrs Tongs had been discharged by the crisis assessment and discharge team (CATT) and that she had a history of family and domestic trauma and so therefore psychological counselling was recommended. She had started drinking alcohol again. By 16 December 2019 she was on the antidepressant venlafaxine but could only collect it fortnightly because of the overdose. An entry for 2 January 2020 indicates Mrs Tongs was going to Western Australia for 3 weeks and she was only given 10 tablets of her antidepressant medication because of the more recent overdose.

The records of the THS indicate Ms Tongs was treated for sharp stabbing pain of her left flank on 23 January 2019 and for migraines on 2 April and 23 June 2019. There was an admission on 2 April 2019 for a colonoscopy and between 9 and 10 of April 2019 Ms Tongs underwent a procedure in relation to a left ovarian cyst.

On 1 July 2019 she had not called Mr Tongs as she usually would and so he raised the alarm and she was found in a decreased conscious state and she was hypothermic. She had been well the previous evening. It was determined Mrs Tongs had taken an overdose of her antidepressant medication. She was treated and discharged the next day with follow-up by CATT. Her progress was monitored and by mid-July Mrs Tongs was engaging with Aftercare Attempted Suicide Program (ASAP) run by Anglicare. Towards the end of July she was meeting with that organisation weekly and seeing her general practitioner. She was discharged from CATT on 23 July 2019. A letter from that service to her general practitioner noted Mrs Tongs had difficulty with relationships, she had significantly cut back on her alcohol use but she tended to store up her prescribed medications.

Next she had breathing difficulties on 23 August 2019 as a result of a chest infection and therefore she required transport to hospital by ambulance where she was treated. A finger injury on about 23 October 2019 required treatment at hospital 2 days later. During October Mrs Tongs was referred to a psychologist and a report provided to the general practitioner towards the end of November indicated treatment was to continue and Mrs Tongs appeared to be going well.

On 28 December 2019 Mrs Tongs was again taken to hospital by ambulance as a result of an intentional overdose and excessive alcohol consumption. Mrs Tongs was admitted to the

intensive care unit for monitoring and assessed by the on-call psychiatrist. Her notes suggest Mrs Tongs had not intended to take her own life and did not know why she did what she did however admitted she had endured a difficult 2 weeks because “her current partner is turning cold towards her” and this made her feel like not wanting to live. In addition she had been stressed in her employment, although she loved her job, as a community support worker. Mrs Tongs gave a history she was dating 2 men but 2 weeks ago she chose one over the other and she felt the one she chose was being very cold and she was afraid that relationship would end. In addition a week ago she encountered a grandfather of a client who verbally abused her because her client tried to abscond and she could not find him for a while. This, she said, reminded her of her cruel father when she was a young child. She gave a history of being depressed for 20 years and that antidepressants “help a bit”. She said her father was physically abusive towards her as was her first husband. She had difficulties with her second husband but she acknowledged they were friends now and he supported her.

Mrs Tongs was discharged from hospital on 29 December 2019 and was followed up by the CATT on that day and on the 30 December 2019 when she advised she was no longer suicidal. She was also discharged with a 10 day script of antidepressant medication, she was to be reviewed by her GP early in the next week and her ex-husband was spoken to and it was agreed Mrs Tongs would re-present to the emergency department if she was struggling. She encountered further difficulties the next day and attended the Parkside Clinic for review. At that review it was thought Mrs Tongs had withdrawal symptoms from the alcohol and antidepressants. She was released with medication and followed up the next day by CATT when she said she was not suicidal or at risk of self-harm. She was monitored daily from thereon until the medication which had been dispensed at the Parkside Clinic was discontinued. She was then discharged from CATT so she could travel to Kalgoorlie to see her daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter on 7 January 2020. Mrs Tongs was due to return to Tasmania on 24 January 2020. There are no medical records between 6 January 2020 and the date of Mrs Tongs’ death.

### **Circumstances of Death**

On Saturday 8 February 2020 Ms Thompson picked up Mrs Tongs’ grandson in order to give Mrs Tongs some respite. At around 21:30 hours Ms Thompson received a distressed call from Mrs Tongs who was trying to reach Mr Johnson but she could not raise him. Ms Thompson asked if Mrs Tongs wanted to come around for coffee but she declined. Ms Thompson advised Mrs Tongs she would contact her if Mr Johnson messaged her. He did message her about 30 minutes later and she advised him Mrs Tongs had said she was going to do something to herself at Swamp Road. He advised Ms Thompson he was in Strahan and he would not be back until the next day.

Ms Thompson advised Mrs Tongs Mr Johnson was in Strahan and she was not to do anything stupid. She also tried calling Mrs Tongs but her phone was switched off.

I have examined the messages on Mrs Tongs' phone. There are some messages on 7 February 2020 which suggest she was having difficulties at work<sup>4</sup>. There are 11 messages to Mr Johnson between 16:17 hours and 23:43 hours on that day. He did not respond. On 8 February 2020 there are 26 messages between them; 20 sent by Mrs Tongs and 6 by Mr Johnson. Mr Johnson's last message is recorded as being sent at 23:05 hours in which he says he was not going to argue anymore tonight and that he would talk to her in the next couple of days. After that message Mrs Tongs sent him a further 6 messages. She then sent a further 15 messages to him between 00:01 hours and 03:41 hours on 9 February 2020. In one message she tells Mr Johnson not to come to their special place in Swamp Road because she didn't want him to see her and she advised him to call the police. In at least 2 of the last 4 messages she is saying goodbye to him.

Later that morning Mr Johnson called Ms Thompson and agreed Mrs Tongs needed some help. As it was coming up to lunchtime and as Ms Thompson had not heard from Mrs Tongs she decided to go for a drive to Mrs Tongs' home. Her car was missing although her dog was inside. She then went to Mr Howe's home but neither he nor Mrs Tongs was present. Ms Thompson searched the area and located Mrs Tongs' motor vehicle on River Road which is off Swamp Road at Sprent. Mrs Tongs was seated on a couch at the rear of her vehicle. She had a shotgun resting between her legs and an injury to her chest. She was deceased. Ms Thompson rang 000 and Mr Tongs.

### **Investigation**

Ms Thompson directed the ambulance to where Mrs Tongs had been located. Ambulance personnel determined there were no signs of life. At about 13:15 hours Senior Constables Dean and Rigby were contacted by radio dispatch services and advised to attend a suicide on a bush track<sup>5</sup> off Swamp Road at Sprent. Those officers attended and were directed to a vehicle where they observed an old couch facing the rear of the vehicle. The vehicle's tailgate was open and Mrs Tongs was observed seated on the couch wrapped in a doona. She had hold of a firearm which had one fired cartridge in the breach. At the scene police observed a near empty bottle of alcohol and 4 empty Pepsi cans on the ground. In addition police observed a number of discarded

---

<sup>4</sup> A person who Mrs Tongs provided care to for 7 months has advised my office he was aware Mrs Tongs had some mental health issues however her employer had significantly cut back her hours. He says she was told no shifts would be made available to her when he was told there was no one available to provide him with the care and support he required. This he said created significant financial stress for Mrs Tongs which was exacerbated by the need to care for and support her grandson.

<sup>5</sup> I infer the bush track is what Ms Thompson refers to as River Road.

pre-rolled roll your own cigarette butts and a cigarette lighter. A drinking glass which appeared to contain cola residue was on the rear bumper as was a mobile phone in a holder containing identification in the name of Mrs Tongs together with a cigarette holder which contained pre-rolled cigarettes similar to the butts found on the ground. Partially used blister packs of various medications were located in the vehicle but these did not indicate an overdose of medication. A suicide note was located in the rear section of the vehicle.

Formal identification was completed by Mr Tongs who attended after receiving the call from Ms Thompson.

A forensics officer, First Class Constable Wotherspoon, attended and examined both the scene and Mrs Tongs. As a result of the examination of the scene and Mrs Tongs and after considering the suicide note and Mrs Tongs' text messages police formed the view Mrs Tongs died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Having considered all the evidence including the medical evidence I agree with that conclusion.

A post-mortem was conducted by the forensic pathologist Dr Terry Brain on 11 February 2020. In his affidavit Dr Brain says Mrs Tongs' cause of death was exsanguination due to a gunshot wound to the upper left chest. I accept his opinion as to Mrs Tongs' cause of death.

Toxicological testing was completed and showed a low level of alcohol in her body and a range of prescription medications, all at therapeutic levels.

Mrs Tongs had a current firearms licence and had three firearms registered to her, including the firearm found at the scene.

### **Comments and Recommendations**

I am satisfied there are no suspicious circumstances surrounding Mrs Tong's death. I find that she took the action that led to her death alone and with the intention of ending her life.

Mrs Tongs was not a physically well person. In addition she had suffered from depression for approximately 20 years and had previously attempted suicide in 2002 and in July and December 2019. Mrs Tongs, had over the years, difficulties with her children and relationship problems. She had essentially raised her grandson who had his own developmental issues which added to her levels of stress. It also seems she was under some financial pressure and she was experiencing difficulties in her workplace. The final straw appears to be the breakdown in her relationship with Mr Johnson.

I am satisfied given my careful examination of the medical records Mrs Tongs was appropriately treated by her general practitioner and by staff of the THS including the Parkside Clinic.

The circumstances of Mrs Tongs' 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 Tongs.

**Dated:** 30 November 2022 at Hobart in the State of Tasmania.

**Robert Webster**  
**Coroner**