

IN THE CORONERS' COURT OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Rel No: A0022/2024

Police No: 24 54060

CORONERS FINDINGS

ROAD DEATH 23 of 2024

Section 34 of the Coroners Act 1993

I, Elisabeth Armitage, Coroner, having investigated the death of a **18 YEAR OLD CAUCASIAN MALE** and without holding an inquest, find that the deceased was born on **28 June 2005** and that his **death occurred on 31 May 2024, at Bougainvillea Avenue, Eastside in the Northern Territory.**

Introduction:

60 People lost their lives on Territory roads in 2024. The highest road toll per capita in over a decade and by far the highest in the country. These findings concern road death 23.

The 'Fatal 5' factors which are considered to give rise to the greatest risk of road crash deaths or serious injury are:

- Drink/drug driving
- Failure to wear a seatbelt
- Excessive speed
- Distraction (e.g. mobile phone use)
- Fatigue

In the Northern Territory:

- 41% of fatal crashes involve alcohol, which is perhaps not surprising given that the Northern Territory has the highest per person alcohol consumption in Australia. In 2016 it was 27% higher than the national average.
- 33% of fatal crashes include the failure to wear a seatbelt.
- 91% of fatal crashes are speed related.
- 7% of fatal crashes involve drivers 18-19 years of age.

This crash involved 3 of the Fatal 5.

The 18 year old, relatively inexperienced, male driver was partying with his friends when he decided to go "hooning". Although he held a zero alcohol licence, he was very intoxicated with a blood alcohol reading of 0.20% (4 x the legal limit). He was not wearing a seatbelt and he was speeding on a suburban street. He lost control of his car and crashed headlong into a large tree growing on the verge of the road. He was trapped in his crushed vehicle and passed away shortly after he was extricated.

His death is a tragedy for his family and friends and the wider community.

Cause of death:

- | | | |
|------|---|--|
| 1(a) | Disease or condition leading directly to death: | Blunt impact trauma to the torso |
| 1(b) | Morbid conditions giving rise to the above cause: | Reported motor vehicle crash (driver) |
| 1(c) | | Acute alcohol intoxication |

Following an autopsy on 4 June 2024, Forensic Pathologist, Dr Marianne Tiemensma commented:

- This was the reported death of a healthy 18-year-old adult male who was involved in a single motor vehicle collision as the driver; the car reportedly impacted with a big tree.
- Post-mortem examination (external examination and CT scan) showed blunt impact trauma to the torso that resulted in a massive haemopericardium (blood collection around the heart in the pericardial sac), bilateral haemothoraces (blood collection in the chest cavity), haemoperitoneum (blood collection in the peritoneal cavity), in addition to a fractures involving the left femur. Without an internal examination, the source of the bleeding cannot be confirmed, however the CT scan findings suggest aortic laceration and liver injury.
- Post-mortem toxicological analysis showed a significantly elevated blood alcohol concentration of 0.20%. Although the clinical picture of acute alcohol intoxication differs from person to person, and in the same person from time to time, a blood alcohol concentration of 0.20% is expected to correlate with a strong degree of intoxication, with some of the expected effects including impaired coordination, balance and gait disturbance, slowed reaction to stimuli, and partial amnesia.
- I have no reason to believe with the information available and findings made during external examination and post-mortem CT scan of the body that the death was due to any other cause than the injuries sustained during the impact of the decedent's vehicle with the tree, whilst under the influence of alcohol.

Police investigation:

A coronial investigation by police found no suspicious circumstances surrounding this death.

Circumstances:

This 18 year old driver was born in the Northern Territory, was employed, and lived in Alice Springs. He is described by the people close to him as having a great sense of humour and being a caring individual who would always help his mates when needed.

On 31 May 2024, between 8pm and 10.25pm, he was socialising and drinking alcohol with his girlfriend and some other friends at his home on Bougainvillea Avenue. He told the group he wanted to do “skids”. At about 10.25pm he got into his car and started doing “burnouts” in front of his house.

At 10.40pm, he told the group he was going to do “skids” and a lap, and drove off. After watching her boyfriend drive away, at 10.44pm his girlfriend heard a loud crash. Fearing that her boyfriend had crashed his car, she went to investigate and found him in the driver's seat of his vehicle crashed into a tree in front of 39 Bougainvillea Avenue. She called 000 at around 10.46pm and requested St John Ambulance. She stayed with him until the ambulance arrived.

At 10.53pm, St John Ambulance attended the crash location with police and firefighters. He was trapped in the vehicle and firefighters freed him, while St John paramedics performed vital first aid. Due to the nature of his critical injuries, he was transported to the Alice Springs Hospital and a short time later was declared deceased at 11.59pm.

Location of Crash, Licencing and Registration:

The crash was on the verge/nature strip at 39 Bougainvillea Avenue, East Side, Alice Springs. He had collided head on with a large gum tree on the verge.

He held a NT C- Class Licence with Zero Blood Alcohol Content Conditions.

The vehicle was a White Isuzu D-Max Utility bearing NT registration.

Vehicle Inspection:

The vehicle sustained catastrophic damage due to the impact of the collision with the tree. The Motor Vehicle Registry Inspector listed multiple defects caused by the crash. There were no pre-crash mechanical defects identified as contributing to the crash. However, the tyres were in poor condition and below the minimum tread depth which would have negatively affected the vehicles turning and braking capacity.

Tests and/or Calculations Conducted:

The scene was digitally mapped. However, there were insufficient consistent marks to reliably estimate the speed of the vehicle.

Road Features, Weather and Lighting:

The crash occurred on an asphalt/bitumen road situated in a residential suburb.

The road is a designated 60 km per hour zone and has two lanes of traffic, one for each direction. There is no centre line marked on the road surface at the crash scene. The road surface was in good condition and level. The road leading up to the crash site follows a south-west curve on Bougainvillea Avenue.

There was a small amount of rain earlier in the day but the road was dry at the time of the crash.

The road has regular intervals of streetlights and is well lit at night. The road features were visible due to the numerous streetlights.

Investigating Officer's Opinion as to the Cause of Crash:

The crash was due to several contributing factors and the following circumstances.

Alcohol and Other Drugs

The driver's blood alcohol content returned a result 0.20 grams of Alcohol, 4 times the legal limit which would have resulted in a lower reaction speed and poor decision making. Despite several witnesses alleging that the driver had consumed MOMA (Methylenedioxymethamphetamine), the toxicology from blood taken returned a negative result.

Speed

Although a precise speed calculation was not able to be obtained from tyre markings, there were sufficient markings to indicate high speed.

Between Jasmine Court and Cordia Street a tyre friction mark on the road surface indicated a high speed turn which put pressure/weight on the tyres (tyre deflection) resulting in the right-side tyres widening. At this point, due to his speed, the driver was not able to control the vehicle and the vehicle travelled to the wrong side of the road. The vehicle mounted the curb at 43 Bougainvillea Avenue. It continued along the nature strip and crossed over Cordia Street. It again mounted the curb and collided with the large gum on the verge in front of 39 Bougainvillea Avenue.

The speedometer was locked at 70-75km/h suggesting this was the approximate speed on impact.

Limited Driving Experience and Recklessness

The driver was only 18 years of age with limited driving experience. He had recently obtained his full driver's licence but was still subject to zero alcohol conditions.

The driver's witnessed "hooning" prior to the crash indicates that his reckless manner of driving contributed to the crash.

No Seatbelt

There is no evidence to suggest that the driver was wearing a seatbelt correctly. The witnesses who were first on the scene and the paramedics said that he was not wearing a seatbelt.

There were no signs of strain on the seat belt mechanism, which would normally be present if it had been worn.

Vehicle Condition

The tyres were in poor condition with signs of rot, flaking and bald spots, possibly due to prior hooning and burn outs. The condition of the tyres would have reduced the driver's ability to control the vehicle during the turn, and negatively impacted its braking.

Decision not to hold an inquest:

Pursuant to 16(1) of the *Coroners Act 1993* I decided not to hold an inquest because the investigations into the death disclosed the time, place and cause of death and the relevant circumstances concerning the death. I do not consider that the holding of an inquest would elicit any information additional to that disclosed in the investigation to date. The circumstances do not require a mandatory inquest because:

- The deceased was not, immediately before death, a person held in care or custody; and
- The death was not caused or contributed to by injuries sustained while the deceased was held in custody; and
- The identity of the deceased is known.