

IN THE CORONERS' COURT OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Rel No: D0322/2024

Police No: 24 131559

CORONERS FINDINGS

ROAD DEATH 60 OF 2024

Section 34 of the Coroners Act 1993

I, Elisabeth Armitage, Coroner, having investigated the death of a **74 year old Aboriginal male** and without holding an inquest, find that he was born on **19 October 1950** and that his **death occurred on 29 December 2024, at Royal Darwin Hospital in the Northern Territory.**

Introduction:

This was the last road death of 2024. A particularly deadly year on NT roads in which 60 people lost their lives.

This 74 year old Aboriginal driver was intoxicated (0.14%) and not wearing seatbelt. He drifted off the road and was involved in a single vehicle rollover crash. He was ejected from the vehicle and suffered serious injuries. He was taken to hospital but died from his injuries four days later.

Cause of death:

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|------|--|---|
| 1(a) | Disease or condition leading directly to death: | Complications of multiple blunt force injuries |
| 1(b) | Morbid conditions giving rise to the above cause: | Reported motor vehicle crash (driver) |
| 1(c) | | Acute Alcohol intoxication |
| 2 | Other significant conditions contributing to death but not related to the condition causing death: | Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease |

Following an autopsy on 30 December 2024, Forensic Pathologist, Dr Donovan Loots commented:

Comments

The opinion as to the cause of death is based on the available police and medical information, and an external post-mortem examination including ancillary investigations.

A post-mortem external examination was conducted on the body of a 74-year-old male with a reported history of having been involved in a single vehicle – single occupant motor vehicle accident. The decedent reportedly sustained significant chest and spinal injuries and was transferred to RDH for further treatment. He was subsequently palliated due to the complications of his sustained injuries in the setting of his severe underlying chronic lung disease. He was declared life extinct four days later.

External examination revealed evidence of medical intervention. There was an intercostal chest drain in situ in the right chest. Multiple blunt force injuries (abrasions, lacerations and contusions) were noted to the body, chiefly involving the head torso and upper and lower limbs.

Toxicology analysis was conducted on ante-mortem blood specimens and detected a blood alcohol concentration of 0.14% (a level considered approximately 3 times above the legal limit to drive a vehicle). Toxicology testing further detected the presence of ketamine (0.15mg/L), a drug regularly used during resuscitation as an anaesthetic induction agent. Ondansetron (an anti-emetic agent) was detected but not quantified.

Review of Northern Territory electronic case records showed:

On 25 December 2024, the decedent was brought into RDH by ambulance following a single vehicle collision in which the decedent suffered multiple blunt force injuries.

Upon examination it was discovered that the decedent had significant chest injuries with multiple right-sided rib fractures with a flail segment of the chest wall and associated right haemopneumothorax. A chest drain was inserted to manage the chest injuries.

A CT scan was conducted and revealed multiple chest (rib and sternum), spinal (thoracic and lumbar) and pelvic (acetabulum and pubic rami) bone fractures. There was retroperitoneal haemorrhage noted in the abdomen which appeared to be in relation to the lumbar spine fractures.

The decedent was stabilised and admitted to ICU for further treatment. During the admission, information was received from family that the decedent was a heavy smoker (>100 pack years) and had long standing severe chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) which was self-managed with salbutamol puffers.

Discussions were had with family regarding transfer to Royal Adelaide Hospital for further care, however, given the significant chest injuries on the background of his severe COPD and evolving respiratory failure, the decision was made in consultation with the family to transition to comfort care (palliation).

The decedent was extubated on 29 December 2024 in the presence of family and passed away a short time later.

Police investigation:

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

Background:

The driver was born at Alice Springs and as a young child, he and his sister were taken away from their mother by the Government, to the Mission on Croker Island as part of the 'Stolen

Generation' Policy. In 1966 he became a foster child and moved to Darwin where he was raised.

He completed school, was employed, married, raised two children and later divorced. He loved fishing, hunting, camping and exploring. He was mechanically minded and described as a 'Jack of all trades' who enjoyed all things outdoors and a few alcoholic drinks.

He is mourned by his family and friends.

Circumstances:

On Christmas Day the driver consumed an unknown amount of alcohol from the early hours at his residence. He was seen by his neighbour at around 8.00am. His neighbour waved and in a slurred voice the driver said, "how ya going".

At around 6.55pm the driver started his car and left his property.

At around 7.05pm a 000 call reported there had been a motor vehicle crash on Wheewall Road, Livingstone. The driver was ejected during the single vehicle rollover through the side window and located some two metres from the vehicle.

St John Paramedics arrived at the scene at 7.35pm.

The driver was stabilised in readiness to be transferred to Royal Darwin Hospital, arriving there at 8.47pm.

He succumbed to his injuries and passed away in ICU on 29 December 2024 at 11.30am.





Digital images provided by Darwin Traffic Policing

The crash occurred on a sealed bitumen section of Wheewall Road, Livingstone, between 125 and 155 Wheewall Road. The road has a slight bend. The in and outbound lanes are delineated with a broken white centre line and there are painted 'fog lines' marking the road edges.

The road has cleared, gravel shoulders with an approximate 1.5m gradual decline. The fence line at the front of 145 Wheewall Road is steel wiring between evenly spaced out star pickets.

The crash occurred at dusk, in clear, dry conditions.

The vehicle was a 2006 Ford TX Territory Wagon bearing NT registration. On 8 May 2025, a vehicle inspection was completed by a Transport Officer from the Northern Territory Government, Motor Vehicle Registry at the Northern Territory Police Vehicle Compound. The vehicle was in un-roadworthy condition and the vehicle body had sustained damage, consistent with a vehicle roll over. The mechanical issues identified in the report are not believed to have caused or contributed to the outcome of the crash.

Opinion as to the Cause of Crash [Officer in charge]:

The following factors are likely to have contributed to the crash:

The driver's intoxication level, likely affecting his cognitive ability and decision-making process.

The driver was not wearing a seatbelt at the time of the crash.

Police consider that it is likely the driver fell asleep whilst driving, based on tyre marks that drift off the road before the vehicle rolled, and there being no evidence of any braking before the crash.

Decision not to hold an inquest:

Under section 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 and 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.