



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 deaths of Gregory Frank Burkhalter and Diane Francis Burkhalter

Find, pursuant to Section 28(1) of the *Coroners Act 1995* in respect of Gregory Frank Burkhalter, that:

- a) The identity of the deceased is Gregory Frank Burkhalter, date of birth 22 October 1950;
- b) Mr Burkhalter died as a result of the effects of an accidental house fire in the circumstances set out further in this finding;
- c) The cause of death was carbon monoxide toxicity due to inhalation of carbon monoxide produced by the fire;
- d) Mr Burkhalter died on 26 May 2024 at Sidmouth, Tasmania.

And find, pursuant to Section 28(1) of the *Coroners Act 1995* in respect of Diane Francis Burkhalter, that:

- a) The identity of the deceased is Diane Frances Burkhalter, date of birth 11 August 1949.
- b) Mrs Burkhalter died as a result of injuries sustained in an accidental house fire in the circumstances set out further in this finding;
- c) The cause of death was severe burns; and
- d) Mrs Burkhalter died on 5 June 2024 at Hobart, Tasmania.

In making the above findings, I have had regard to the evidence gained in the joint investigation into the deaths Mr and Mrs Burkhalter. The evidence includes:

- The Police Report of Death for the Coroner;

- Affidavits confirming identity;
- Opinion of the forensic pathologist regarding cause of death;
- Toxicology Report from Forensic Science Service Tasmania;
- Hospital records;
- Medical records from West Tamar Health for Mrs Burkhalter;
- Fire Investigation Report from James Foster of Tasmania Fire Service;
- Affidavit of Gretchen-Elizabeth Burkhalter, sister of Mr Burkhalter;
- Affidavit of Lynette Reid, neighbour of Mr and Mrs Burkhalter;
- Affidavit of David Jackson, neighbour of Mr and Mrs Burkhalter;
- Affidavit of May Thomas, attending paramedic;
- Affidavit of Todd Russell, Brigade Chief of Beaconsfield Fire Brigade; and
- Affidavits of eight attending and investigating police officers, together with body worn camera footage and photographs.

Mr Burkhalter was 73 years of age and Mrs Burkhalter was 74 years of age. They were both born in the United States. They had lived for many years in their residence at 320 Collins Lane in Sidmouth in northern Tasmania. Both were in reasonable health and lived a private lifestyle.

On the night of Saturday 25 May 2024, Mr and Mrs Burkhalter went to bed in their separate rooms as usual. Mrs Burkhalter slept on a bed in the lounge/dining room. She had an electric blanket fitted to her mattress which had likely been turned on. She had also placed two heated cat beds at the foot of her mattress which were also turned on. Mr and Mrs Burkhalter had pet cats, but it appears that, at least during this particular night, Mrs Burkhalter was using the heated cat beds for additional warmth to her feet. Relevantly, her past medical records indicate that she had painful right ankle and foot conditions which remained untreated. At 8.00am the following morning, Mrs Burkhalter was woken by the smell of smoke. She also said that the smoke alarm had activated. She got out of bed and noticed that one of the cat beds at her feet was heavily smoking. In an attempt to move the cat bed, she lifted it. Unfortunately, this action provided increased oxygenation, and the cat bed ignited into flames. Mrs Burkhalter could not extinguish the fire, which proceeded to move rapidly throughout the house. Mrs Burkhalter initially planned to telephone for help, but the phone was not accessible due to the fire. She then left the house and determined to drive and get help. Mrs Burkhalter started her car and attempted to navigate the steep

driveway. However, in her anxious and frightened state, she lost control of her car and drove into a tree at low speed. She did not suffer significant injuries in that crash but had suffered severe burns from the fire from the cat bed.

At 8.11am, a neighbour called 000 after hearing two loud explosions coming from the property. These were likely the ignition of household gas cylinders. At 8.26am, firefighters from Beaconsfield arrived at the assistance. Residence. They noticed a vehicle partially off the road that had run into a tree. They spoke to Mrs Burkhalter after she stumbled out from behind the vehicle. She was unable to tell the firefighters where her husband was. The firefighters saw that the house was on fire and called for police and ambulance personnel. Firefighting efforts commenced at 8.30am, with multiple further firefighting personnel and appliances assisting. Due to the magnitude and intensity of the fire, firefighters conducted several hours of suppression activity to bring it under control. Once the fire was out and had cooled, two firefighters entered the remains and located the body of Mr Burkhalter on the floor of his bedroom.

Ambulance Tasmania paramedics arrived on the scene at 8.46am and provided aid to Mrs Burkhalter. She had suffered burns to the left side of her body. She was agitated and appeared confused or delirious. Mrs Burkhalter was taken to the Launceston General Hospital for treatment. Due to the severity of her burns, Mrs Burkhalter was immediately transferred to the Royal Hobart Hospital (RHH). During the transport, Mrs Burkhalter unfortunately suffered a heart attack. Once at the RHH, Mrs Burkhalter had surgery to remove a large blood clot from her heart and insertion of a stent. Mrs Burkhalter subsequently underwent skin graft surgery. However, her prognosis was very poor due to the severity of her burns. Following family consultation, active treatment was ceased on 5 June 2024. She was extubated and passed away that day.

I am satisfied that a thorough investigation has taken place, including examination of the scene by qualified fire scene examiner, James Foster. In his very detailed report, Mr Foster found that there was no evidence suggestive of ignition from an incendiary, mechanical, chemical or natural source. Having regard to the scene observations and witness accounts, Mr Foster determined that the source of the fire was at the foot of Mrs Burkhalter's bed where remains of the electric blanket and wiring for pet beds were located. The fire investigator concluded that the electric blanket fitted to the bed was not suitable for Australian grid voltage of 230 volts. Rather it was rated at 120 volts, being the grid voltage from its country of origin. The insulation rating and controls were therefore not

adequate for use with the higher voltage of current. The heat from both the electric blanket and electric cat bed being operated at the same time resulted in failure of the insulation of the electric blanket. This excessive heat generated resulted in the combustion of the bedding material surrounding it. Mr Foster also noted that there was no evidence found of any smoke alarm within the residence. Although Mrs Burkhalter told police that the smoke alarm had activated, her account was provided to police in hospital shortly after the incident when she was in a state of confusion and shock. It is unclear whether there was actually a working smoke alarm in the residence.

There is no direct evidence regarding the movements of Mr Burkhalter within the house prior to his death. Mrs Burkhalter had not seen him that morning and it is reasonable to infer that he was asleep in his bedroom before he awoke to the fire. The evidence indicates that Mr Burkhalter had made an attempt to extract himself from the house, given his position in the room when he was located but was overcome by the fire fumes before he could leave.

Comments and Recommendations

The tragic accidental deaths of Mr and Mrs Burkhalter arose from an unusual set of circumstances. However, their deaths highlight the following critical matters:

- That householders should install and properly maintain a sufficient number of smoke alarms within their residence. This is not only a requirement of the law in Tasmania but is a critical life-saving measure in the event of a house fire.¹
- That it is dangerous to operate a 120-volt appliance using the Australian 230-volt electricity grid. The appliance, subjected to almost double its intended voltage, represents a fire hazard.

I extend my appreciation to investigating officer Constable Tiarna Rand for her investigation and report. I also acknowledge the excellent report from fire scene examiner, James Foster, which has greatly assisted me in these findings. Finally, I acknowledge the efforts of all first responders to this incident, and in particular, the firefighting crews.

¹ For further information see [Smoke alarms | Tasmania Fire Service](#).

The circumstances of Mr Gregory Burkhalter's death are not such as to require me to make recommendations pursuant to Section 28 of the *Coroners Act* 1995.

I convey my sincere condolences to the family and loved ones of Mr Burkhalter.

Dated: 17 February 2026 at Hobart, in the State of Tasmania.

Olivia McTaggart
Coroner