



IN THE CORONERS' COURT OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Rel No: D0097/2024

Police No: 24 37322

**CORONERS' FINDINGS**

**ROAD DEATH 19 OF 2024**

*Section 34 of the Coroners Act 1993*

I, Elisabeth Armitage, Coroner, having investigated the death of a **22-YEAR-OLD CAUCASIAN FEMALE** and without holding an inquest, find that she was born on **23 April 2001** and that her **death occurred on 17 April 2024, at Royal Darwin Hospital in the Northern Territory.**

**Introduction:**

Her best friend described this 22-year-old as a “once in a lifetime person. She was outgoing and brought light into any dark room”.

The total road toll of 2024 reached an horrific high of 60 deaths. She was the 19<sup>th</sup> person to have died on NT roads in 2024. Her death was preventable. She was a young lady with great potential and her death is a tragedy for her family, her friends and our community.

Sadly, this vivacious 22-year-old passed away following a single vehicle rollover in the rural area of Herbert. 73% of fatal crashes occur in rural and remote areas and of these, 47% involve ‘overturned’ or ‘run-off’ incidents.

The ‘Fatal 5’ factors which are considered to give rise to the greatest risk of road crash death and serious injury are:

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

Four of these Fatal 5 factors were present in this crash and death. Her blood alcohol reading on admission to hospital was 0.12% and there is evidence that she had been drinking alcohol past midnight on the morning she crashed. She was not wearing a seatbelt which was likely not in working order before the crash. She was speeding, her car was estimated to be travelling at 96kph on a road with a 70kph speed limit. It is likely she was tired, having been up most of the previous night.

**Cause of death:**

- 1(a) Disease or condition leading directly to death: **Traumatic brain injury**
- 1(b) Morbid conditions giving rise to the above cause: **Reported single motor vehicle collision (driver)**
- 1(c) **Acute alcohol intoxication**

**Circumstances surrounding death and summary of medical history provided by the Forensic Pathologist:**

- The decedent was a 22-year-old adult female who was reportedly involved in a single motor vehicle collision on 14/04/2024 as the sole occupant and driver. The decedent was reportedly ejected from the vehicle.
- The decedent was intubated at the scene and admitted to Royal Darwin Hospital with a depressed level of consciousness and the following injuries were documented:
  - Traumatic brain injury (diffuse axonal injury and skull vault and base fractures).

*An extraventricular drain and intracranial pressure monitor were placed in theatre; her intracranial pressures remained high despite maximal medical therapy. Repeat CT imaging showed diffuse brain oedema and there was no surgical option for treatment.*

- Scalp haematoma.
  - Left open clavicle and 1st rib fractures.
  - Left scapular fracture.
  - Left pneumothorax with lung contusion.
  - Right lung contusion.
  - Lacerations and abrasions involving the left hip, right thigh, left shin, and right arm.
- The ethanol concentration on a hospital admission blood sample taken at 3pm was 0.12% (26.8 mmol/ L).
  - The decedent's condition never improved and formal brain death testing was performed on 17/04/2024 at 14:18 pm, followed by an organ harvesting procedure on 18/04/2024.

**Police investigation:**

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

**Circumstances:**

This 22-year-old female had a passion for horse riding and the outdoors. She enjoyed the Territory lifestyle and participated in activities including camping and four-wheel driving.

At about 1.00pm on 13 April 2024, she went to a local creek with her friends where she spent several hours swimming and drinking alcohol. At about 5.00pm the group went to a friend's house in McKinlay Road, Herbert. There the group continued to swim in the pool and listen to music. The 22-year-old continued to drink beer throughout the evening and is reported to have consumed around 15 – 20 cans of beer. A friend described her as “fine...she wasn't stumbling or anything like that”.

At approximately 12.42am the following morning (14 April 2024), the 22-year-old and three of her friends decided to go four-wheel driving in nearby Black Jungle. They took her 2005 Nissan Patrol 4x4 and a Landcruiser ute. Both vehicles became bogged on more than one occasion, and they worked through the night attempting to recover the vehicles. They managed to get about one hour's sleep before eventually being rescued by another friend.

At about 10.30am that morning they all returned to the house in McKinlay Road where they cleaned up and organised their recovery equipment.

At approximately 11.20am she departed McKinlay Road and commenced the short drive to Daniel Circuit, with an apparent plan to check on a friend who had hurt her back the night before. While driving along Daniel Circuit she was traveling at approximately 96kph, 26kmph above the posted 70kph speed limit. She was not wearing a seatbelt.

For an unknown reason, she crossed over the oncoming lane and veered off the road. She overcorrected her vehicle attempting to return to the correct side of the road. During this maneuver her vehicle rolled. She was ejected from the vehicle and came to rest on the side of the road. The vehicle continued to roll and became stationary on a nearby fence.

Residents from nearby properties witnessed the crash and phoned Triple Zero.

Emergency services received two separate calls on 14 April 2024 at 11.24am. The residents found the 22-year-old lying on her back and motionless on the side of the road. She was breathing but not responsive. They performed first aid by placing her into the recovery position.

NT Police were first on scene and observed her being held in the recovery position. Her eyes were open, but she was not responsive, and she appeared to have suffered a catastrophic head injury.

St John Ambulance were at the scene by 11.39am, with a secondary crew arriving at noon. St John was assisted by CareFlight. It was determined that it would be quicker to retrieve her by ambulance alone, than a combination of ambulance and helicopter. Once she was stabilised, she was taken to Royal Darwin Hospital by ambulance arriving there at 2.46pm.

Following surgery she was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit. Tragically she did not improve and on 16 April her family were informed that she had suffered an unsurvivable brain injury. Brain death was declared at 2.18pm on 17 April 2024.

Her family agreed to organ donation, and she donated organs to five recipients.

### **Daniel Circuit, Herbert**

The section of roadway where the crash occurred is a sealed bitumen road, with a posted speed limit of 70 kilometres per hour. It was moderately curved to the left as shown in the following photo. There were no deviations or obstructions on the roadway. It was in good condition at the time of the crash with the road surface being dry and free of fluids or

lubricants. There were no adverse weather conditions present. It was daytime with no visual obstructions present.



#### **Tests and/or Calculations Conducted:**

The Major Crash Investigation Unit surveyed the crash scene on the 15 April 2024.

Speed calculations were conducted which estimated the vehicles speed to be approximately 96kph, being 26kmh over posted speed limit, at the commencement of the yaw.

The motor vehicle was a 2005 Nissan Patrol 4x4 with Victorian registration. An inspection was conducted by Motor Vehicle Registry on 22 May 2024. Most findings related to the crash, but it also found that the driver's seat belt would not retract, and no airbag was fitted in the steering wheel.

#### **Opinion as to Cause of Crash:**

From the scene evidence and information gathered, it was the investigating member's opinion that the crash and death were the result of alcohol, fatigue, excessive speed, and a failure to wear a seatbelt. Her family agreed to organ donation, and she donated organs to five recipients.



Photographs courtesy of Major Crash Investigators

### **Decision not to hold an inquest:**

Under section 16(1) of the *Coroners Act 1993* (“the Act”) 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 relevant 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.