

## ***Inquest into the Death of HD (Name Suppressed) [2021] NTLC 029 – Northern Territory Coroners Court***

‘Coercive control’ – ‘Controlling and/or jealous behaviour’ – ‘Controlling, jealous, obsessive behaviours by the perpetrator’ – ‘Coroner’s inquest’ – ‘Emotional and psychological abuse’ – ‘Exposing children to domestic and family violence’ – ‘Following, harassing and monitoring’ – ‘Past domestic and family violence’ – ‘People affected by substance misuse’ – ‘People with children’ – ‘People with mental illness’ – ‘Physical violence and harm’ – ‘Post-traumatic stress disorder’ – ‘Protection order’ – ‘Social abuse’ – ‘Systems abuse’ – ‘Victims as (alleged) perpetrators’ – ‘Weapons and threats to kill’

### Proceedings: Coroner’s Inquest.

Facts: An inquest was conducted into the death of a 38-year-old woman, whose partner was a police officer. NT Police did not declare a crime scene in relation to the victim’s death as they believed the cause of her death to be an overdose: [92]. However, there was a significant history of domestic violence, which justified further investigation. The coroner concluded that the cause of death was not substance abuse but a subdural haemorrhage that had begun bleeding three to five days prior to her death, which requires some form of trauma, likely a hit to the head: [66]–[67]. In the five years prior, seventeen complaints had been made to the police of domestic disturbances and violence in her relationship: [8].

The victim had previously been a police officer: [3]. During her relationship with another police officer, she went into labour at 21.5 weeks gestation and her baby passed away, leading to post-traumatic stress-disorder that was never resolved: [5]. After she conceived again, she became dependent on alcohol due to this PTSD: [6]. Due to her alcohol dependence, she was subsequently dismissed as a police officer: [7].

The seventeen reported instances of domestic violence demonstrate a pattern of coercive control by the police officer: [70]. His abuse of the victim was both psychological and physical. Physical violence and domestic disturbances were reported by doctors ([9], [39]), neighbours ([14]–[15], [21], [31]), the victim herself ([16],[36]), rehabilitation providers and services ([18], [37]), bystanders ([23]) and police officers ([32]), as well as the victim’s cousin ([11]), friend ([13]) and coworkers ([48], [53]). These reports included explicit reports of physical violence against the victim: [13], [14], [18], [29], [31], [32], [40], [49]. Co-workers reported to police that the partner had threatened to kill the victim with a knife: [49].

In one of the earliest instances of reported abuse, a protection order was issued against the victim for the protection of her partner and children. No protection order was taken out to protect the victim: [11]. The victim repeatedly refused to give statements or pursue action against her partner: [10], [18], [2]. She repeatedly went back and forth in relation to statements, downplaying previous reports of violence or renegeing on them: [19], [22], [36]. She would refuse to explain injuries or would explain them using a fall: [29], [30], [32], [36]. She sought a protection order application but decided not to proceed within a month of initiating that request: [16]–[17]. One aspect of this was that she thought police would do nothing because her partner is a police officer: [51].

The victim's partner used the victim's alcoholism as a reason for justifying coercion. He provided stories to the police that focused on her intoxication and that explained his violence using narratives that put the blame on the victim such as using a narrative of self-defence: [14], [19], [42]. He tracked the victim's social media accounts and sought to control her through constant messaging: [70]–[71]. He repeatedly stalked her and tried to follow her when she attempted to leave him, for example, when she was visiting her father and also when she was at work: [51]. The victim's partner also used systems abuse against her. For example, he took her to the police station and demanded that she be breached for being intoxicated. At this time she had a wound to the left side of her forehead that was not noted as a potential domestic violence risk: [28].

Decision and Reasoning: The Coroner found that the cause of the victim's death was 'subdural haemorrhage in the context of chronic alcoholism due to post traumatic stress disorder after the death of her first-born child': [94]. He referred his belief that offences may have been committed in connection with the death: [99].

The Coroner also made four recommendations to improve the handling of domestic violence involving police officers: that the Assistant Commissioner responsible for the Domestic and Family Violence Unit oversee all complaints of domestic violence involving police officers ([95]), that processes and procedures be implemented to allow investigating officers to have access to all relevant history and prior matters in relation to investigation of domestic violence ([96]), that all police officers have training and information available to them allowing in the identification of 'red flags' for coercive control' ([97]) and that a risk assessment tool be developed to identify physical and non-physical aspects of domestic and family violence ([98]).

The following extract provides an example of the way in which the deceased's vulnerabilities were used by the partner to justify his controlling behaviour:

[70] HD's partner was from time to time said to be manipulative and controlling. When questioned about his controlling ways he generally indicated that HD was an alcoholic and he needed to know where she was to either stop her drinking or so as to assist her when she was intoxicated. It appeared to explain his tracking her phone. Her alcoholism was provided as the reason he removed her from the house or used force to keep her there. The same might be said when he escorted her to the police station and asked that her bail be breached for drinking. Perhaps it might be seen in his insistence that he pick her up from work or when he intercepted her at the bus stop.

[71] It is difficult however to see her alcoholism as the reason for him reading her texts and having access to her social media accounts. There are instances where he attempted to warn off a person he thought she was having an affair with using her own Messenger account. It also doesn't explain the constant messaging and telephone calls when she was with her father in Queensland. It appears they were more to do with his belief that she may be talking to another male.