



Time for police to look at Ashley Smith case again



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Frame grab from video played in court shows Ashley Smith strapped into a seat with "spit hoods" over her head during a flight between psychiatric facilities.

TORONTO - It was the order from above that resulted in this teen girl's death being now called a homicide. "Do not enter Ashley's cell as long as she is breathing."

That is the one quote out of this lengthy, nauseating inquest that should be engraved on Ashley Smith's tombstone.

Abominable.

This was a troubled, young human being who was in the care of these people after all.

What is human about handing out an order like that or even obeying it?

But that's the order guards at Grand Valley Institution in Kitchener received from their superiors on how to deal with an teenage female inmate on the floor with a ligature around her neck in 2007.

She never did breathe again.

It's ghastly.

And just one of the many hideous revelations that came out of the inquiry that will haunt Corrections Canada for decades.

This is a systemic wart that can't be glossed over.

Or as lawyer Julian Falconer put it so well — someone's "head should be on a (political) platter."

You don't need 104 jury recommendations to prevent another "homicide" like Ashley's.

Compassion, common sense and basic humanity should have prevented it.

Sometimes you have to throw out the rule book and be human.

That this happened is a dark stain on the record of those involved. The real test, however, is what to do about it now.

Some involved have been investigated and cleared, others suspended and fired.

"How could such a flagrant abuse, such a flagrant disregard for human life go unaccounted for?" said Falconer, the Smith family's counsel. "Those who made the order to not go into her cell, the deputy warden, the warden, have yet to be truly investigated or yet to answer for their actions."

The jury was sending a message and in Ashley's memory it must be received.

"She is owed a thorough homicide investigation — and maybe not this time by the Waterloo Regional Police, which did lay criminal negligence charges against four guards that were withdrawn by the crown at a preliminary hearing.

This time get Toronto Police or the OPP or even the RCMP to take this on.

If any of the commanders of homicide squads are worth their salt as police officers, they won't wait for a politician to call for it either.

They heard the jury.

A proper probe is needed. The police should move in with the same kind of energy, commitment and tenacity they did in the Mayor Rob Ford surveillance here in Toronto and get to the bottom of what the five women jury members were trying articulate.

Meanwhile, if the system tries to kick the can down the road and avoid it all, the politicians at both the federal and provincial levels need to get to work on how to teach those inside of the system that they are, in fact, guarding and treating people.

And obviously the senior managers are in need of some training, too.

Hire people who care.

The videos of how they handled Smith showed they treated her more like monster instead as a mentally-ill patient. Taping her to a seat on an airplane to dressing up in full riot gear with helmet and visors shows that something has to change in their approach to people who are not murderers or guilty of other violent acts.

Officer safety is important but communication is as well.

There are times when riot gear is needed but there are times when some finesse can work too.

We saw this same threat of force during the G20 here in 2010. Police officers no longer looked like individuals but appeared as if they were heading into war.

No one is bigger, better or more important than anyone else. In Smith's case, the approach of the guards did not work.

"If you sleep I can go home," said one of the guards smugly.

But Ashley Smith will never get to go home.