

First Nations student deaths inquest in Thunder Bay hears arguments about alcohol

'Alcohol may be the canary in the coal mine, but not the cause' of students' deaths, lawyer says

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The second day of the inquest into the deaths of seven First Nations students in Thunder Bay had a smoother start than its opening day, but ended on a difficult note with questions about the relationship between alcohol use and some of the deaths.

The inquest is examining the circumstances of the deaths of seven young First Nations people who had left their remote communities to attend school in the city.

The proceedings on Tuesday began in one of the biggest courtrooms in Thunder Bay, in contrast to Monday's start which took place in one of the new building's smallest rooms.

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Six months of inquiry began with testimony from forensic pathologist Dr. Toby Rose and forensic toxicologist Karen Woodall.

They went through each of the student deaths, listing their determinations of the cause of death, starting with Paul Panacheese.

The post mortem investigation could find no anatomical or toxicological cause of his death, so it is undetermined or unexplained. Rose said it is likely an underlying, hereditary heart condition, for which his close family members should also get tested.

Earlier this year, presiding coroner Dr. David Eden wrote in a ruling about the scope of the inquest that the 21-year-old's death "may have been related to chronic exposure to drugs and alcohol."

Rose's testimony dispelled that myth.

Relevance of alcohol questioned

Lawyers representing several parties at the inquest challenged the evidence that alcohol was relevant to the other deaths as well.

Woodall said the average concentration of alcohol that is considered fatal 360 mg alcohol per 100 mL of blood. None of the students who died exceeded that level.


Robyn Harper whose cause of death was determined to be "acute ethanol toxicity" had a blood alcohol concentration of 338mg/100mL.

Alcohol was determined as part of the cause of death in the drownings of Jethro Anderson, Reggie Bushie, Kyle Morrisseau and Curran Strang. It was not listed as a cause in the death of Jordan Wabasse.

The inquest continues on Wednesday when jurors are scheduled to take a tour of Dennis Franklin

Cromarty school. Six of the seven young people were students there when they died.


Here is a look at the some of the proceeding from the CBC reporter in the courtroom.

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'What is your evidence that (students) were so intoxicated they ended up in the water?' Lawyer Chantelle Bryson asks pathologists [#cbctb](#)

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'I don't know whether alcohol caused them to fall in water but may have increased the likelihood of that happening,' toxicologist replies

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'Alcohol may be canary in the mine, but not the cause' NAN lawyer Julian Falconer says. 'These youth actually died of neglect' [#cbctb](#)

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Pathologist says she cannot determine whether drowning as cause of death is accidental, suicide or homicide [#cbctb](#)

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'Much of the determination of whether a death is suspicious or not comes from police,' pathologist says. #cbctb

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