



**CORONERS COURT
OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

Inquest:	Inquest into the death of Laurence Paul Lander
Hearing dates:	10 June 2015
Date of findings:	10 June 2015
Place of findings:	NSW Coroner Court - Glebe
Findings of:	Magistrate Sharon Freund, Deputy State Coroner
Catchwords:	CORONIAL LAW – Missing Person; Cause and Manner of Death;
File number:	2014/311202
Representation:	Ms D. Williamson assisting the Deputy State Coroner, Magistrate S.C. Freund;
Findings:	I find that Laurence Paul Lander died sometime after 8am 23 March 1982. In relation to the manner and cause of his death I make an open findings

The Coroners Act 2009 (NSW) in s81 (1) requires that when an inquest is held, the coroner must record in writing his or her findings as to various aspects of the death.

These are the findings of an inquest into the death of Laurence Paul Lander

Introduction

Laurence Paul Lander was born on 15 November 1958. He was last seen alive at about 8 am on 23 March 1982, he was just 23 years of age and intellectually disabled.

The brief of evidence indicates that Laurence had his own teeth which were in good order with no previous dental treatment. He had no history of broken bones, no scars or tattoos and did not wear jewellery.

During his school years Laurence attended Morisset High School. The school history indicates that Laurence exhibited very strange behaviours whilst at school and would more often than not absent himself from the classroom. He was quite isolated with no friends, spending a considerable amount of time hiding in the school toilets.

Laurence, as a result of his mental health issues, had numerous admissions to Morisset Hospital. For the sake completeness I will summarise the most significant of those admissions:

1. Between 10 May 1979 – 11 May 1979: Mental Retardation – Anti-social behaviour

Laurence was admitted under Schedule 2 with delusions, lack of orientation and evidence of failure to apply care for himself. He had been causing a nuisance, threatening people verbally. He preferred to be known as Captain Thunderbolt as he was living in the bush as the bushranger had. He had travelled about NSW a lot, living in the bush, but always came to the attention of police who returned him home. This upset Laurence as he felt he had not done anything wrong. He presented as an unkempt mentally retarded young man with limited vocabulary. Evidence of thought disorder was lacking however he lacked insight into the appropriateness of his behaviour. There

was no disturbance of memory of effects. He was kept overnight and discharged the following day to the care of his parents.

2. Between 30 May 1979 – 19 June 1979: Chronic Schizophrenia; Mental Retardation

Laurence was admitted because he'd been wandering around the countryside making a nuisance of himself by threatening people with a knife and claiming to be a bushranger. His behaviour was childish and erratic. He presented with many features of schizophrenia. He had spent the previous 5-6 years (since leaving school) wandering around NSW living on a pension, sleeping under bridges and in the bush. He was viewed by his parents (and others) as a retarded boy who had eccentric fantasies and a wish to avoid the problems of city living. His father was hostile with him for being a "bludger" and both parents were hostile with the treating Psychologist who viewed Laurence as a sick person needing psychiatric care.

His parents persuaded a Magistrate to discharge him to their care, however Laurence refused to go. They reconsidered their attitude and as Laurence started to respond to the Stelazine medication and ward routine, becoming less restless and unrealistic in his thinking, they became quite grateful and happy for him to be at the hospital. He had weekend leave which was successful and it was felt that he had improved as much as he was likely to. Laurence was considered verbally quite proficient and with stabilisation of his schizophrenic illness it was felt he would function in the borderline range and be capable of Sheltered Workshop employment. He was discharged to his parents care with community support.

3. Between 27 July 1979 – 26 September 1979: Chronic Schizophrenia; Mental Retardation

Laurence was admitted to Newcastle Psychiatric Centre following complaints from the public about his behaviour. He was wandering around near public toilets saying he was Captain Thunderbolt and talking about funerals, death and dying. He was transferred to Morisset Hospital on 03/08/79. He settled fairly well after starting on Modecate Injections. It was felt he would cope at

home if the injections were continued, however his parents were unsure and ambivalent in their attitude toward his treatment, which was thought to make future management difficult.

4. After 7 March 1980:

A determination of Tribunal under Section 14 of the Mental Health Act 1958 was made ordering Laurence (a temporary patient) be reclassified as a continued treatment patient and detained in an admission centre, mental hospital or authorised hospital for further observation and treatment.

The evidence indicates that at about 8.00am on 23 March 1982, Laurence left his home address on a farm at Mt Faulk Road, Cooranbong where he resided with his parents and walked into the bush. At the time he was wearing blue jeans, yellow collared shirt with brown circles and black shoes. He was carrying a water bottle filled with water. The area surrounding the house from where he went missing is 200 acres of bushland. It appears that Laurence had been discharged into the care of his parents well prior to the date of his disappearance.

He was reported missing to Morisset Police Station, 3 days later, on 26 March 1982. The family confirmed they searched around the bush themselves, but indicate that no search was conducted by Police. All checks completed through the Missing Person's Unit, including Centrelink, Medicare, Immigration and Financial Institutions, have shown no activity or activation by Laurence Paul Lander.

The role of a Coroner as set out in s. 81 of the *Coroners Act 2009* is to make findings as to:

1. the identity of the deceased;
2. the date and place of a person's death;
3. the physical or medical cause of death; and
4. the manner of death; in other words, the circumstances surrounding the death.

A Coroner, pursuant to s. 82 of the *Coroners Act 2009*, also has the power to make recommendations concerning any public health or safety issues arising out of the death in question.

The issues in relation to the disappearance and suspected death of Laurence Lander are as follows:

1. Is Laurence Lander deceased?
2. If so, what is the manner and cause of his death?

Unfortunately, Laurence's parents are now deceased. He is survived by his sister, Julie Sander, who resides in Queensland however I am advised that she has mental health issues of her own. She has not seen or heard from her brother since his disappearance.

Conclusion

It seems that despite Laurence Lander being reported missing to Police three days after his disappearance no efforts were made by police to search the bushland surrounding the property of his parents where he was last seen alive. Moreover, it seems that the efforts made by police to investigate Laurence's disappearance were negligible.

His disappearance may have been suspicious but we will never know. I do note however that significant changes have been made to the NSW Police Standard Operating Procedures in regard to missing persons and that those operating procedures would ensure that a missing person like Laurence would not fall off the radar today.

Laurence clearly had mental health issues. It is unlikely he had the wherewithal to survive on his own, without coming to the attention of authorities.

Accordingly, I am satisfied that as he has been missing since 23 March 1982, and taking into consideration the circumstances of his disappearance and his mental health issues I am satisfied on the balance of probabilities that Laurence Lander is

deceased. However there is no evidence before me in relation to the details of his death so in relation to the manner and cause of his death I make an open finding.

Findings required by s81(1)

As a result of considering all of the documentary evidence and the oral evidence heard at the inquest, I am able to confirm that the death occurred and make the following findings in relation to it.

I find that Laurence Paul Lander died sometime after 8am 23 March 1982. In relation to the manner and cause of his death I make an open findings

I close this inquest.

Magistrate S.C Freund

Deputy State Coroner
Glebe

10 June 2015