



STATE CORONER'S COURT OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Inquest:	Inquest into the death of Lynne Barnett
Hearing dates:	21 July 2017, 14 September 2017
Date of findings:	14 September 2017
Place of findings:	State Coroners Court, Glebe
Findings of:	Magistrate Harriet Grahame, Deputy State Coroner
Catchwords:	Coronial Law; cause and manner of death
File number:	2017/63018
Representation:	Samantha Ferguson, Coronial Law Advocate – Advocate assisting the Coroner
Findings:	<p>On the balance of probabilities, I find that Lynne Barnett died between 1 January 2017 and 27 February 2017 at her home address, Unit 14/10 Seale Street, Burwood, NSW. The cause and manner of her death remain unknown.</p>

IN THE STATE CORONER'S COURT
GLEBE
NSW
SECTION 81 CORONERS ACT 2009

REASONS FOR DECISION

1. This inquest concerns the death of Lynne Barnett.

Introduction

2. Lynne was a 70 year old woman, living alone in at the time of her death. Lynne was a single woman, who had no children. She told friends that her parents and sister were dead. Her close friend of 40 years, Mr Garvan Dormer was nominated as her legal beneficiary.
3. At the time of her death, Lynne appears to have been quite socially isolated and to have had few regular social interactions. Little is known about her day to day life, except that she enjoyed reading and frequently visited the Burwood Library. She loved her two cats and appears to have led a fairly quiet life.
4. Lynne is known to have spoken to Mr Craig Charlesworth, a representative of the Department of Housing on 15 December 2016.¹ At that time Lynne had a cold and was coughing throughout the visit. Mr Charlesworth states that he asked Lynne for her "next of kin" details, but none were provided. He states that the property was well maintained.
5. Lynne last spoke to her friend Garvan Dormer not long before Christmas in 2016. They usually spent Christmas together, but this year he had other plans. Lynne was

¹ Statement of Craig Charlesworth, Exhibit 3

apparently very disappointed. Mr Dormer thought she may have been down or depressed. She did not seem well. Unfortunately, although he left messages, he was not able to speak with her again.

6. Lynne Barnett was found on 27 February 2017 at her home. She had been dead for some time.

The role of the Coroner

7. The role of the Coroner is to make findings as to the identity of the nominated person, and in relation to the date and place of death. The Coroner is also to make findings in relation to the manner and cause of the person's death.

Background

8. Lynne was born on 11 April 1946 in Wellington, New Zealand to Elaine and Oliver Barnett.² She had a younger sister Christine³. Both girls became talented singers and established recording careers in Australia and New Zealand in the early days of pop music.
9. Professionally, Lynne used the name Lyn Barnett. Her will was made in the name Lynne Kiora Barnett. She also appears to have been recorded in official documentation as Lynne Kera Barnett and Lynn Barnett.
10. Lynne was a talented and vibrant performer who performed extensively in Australia and New Zealand throughout the 1960s and 1970s. She performed on television shows such as Bandstand and for soldiers serving in Vietnam.⁴ She had a beautiful voice and a charming stage presence. Her friend, Mr Dormer describes Lynne as a fabulous singer and remembered with great affection hearing her sing at the Seagull Lounge at Kings Cross.
11. Mr Dormer states that at some stage Lynne had experienced throat problems and after that did not sing professionally. Although single at the time of her death, she appears to

² Birth Certificate, Exhibit 3

³ It appears that Lynne told her great friend Mr Dormer, that her sister Christine was dead, but inquiries have revealed this was not the case.

⁴ Evidence of Mr Dormer, 21 July 2017, video of Lynn Barnett singing, exhibit 2

have been married in the 1960s and later in a de facto relationship. Mr Dormer said that this relationship was troubled and that it took Lynne some time to recover from it.

12. Lynne lived in the Kings Cross area for many years, before moving to Gosford and then to her last home in Burwood. A neighbour stated that when she first arrived in Burwood some years ago, Lynne was outgoing, but that she had gradually “cut herself off from everyone”.⁵
13. It appears that Lynn and her younger sister Christine had a falling out in around 2002-2003.⁶ Christine lives in New Zealand did not want to be involved in the inquest process.

The events leading up to her death

14. Lynne lived alone in a Department of Housing unit at 14/10 Seale Street, Burwood, NSW.
15. On 27 February 2017, a resident of the unit block where Lynne lived contacted the Department of Housing in relation to a smell coming from Lynne’s unit. A Department of Housing Officer attended the premises and tried to make contact with Lynne. When these attempts were unsuccessful, police were called. Senior Constable Muriwai attended. He reports that on arrival he could immediately smell decomposition. He could also see a large number of flies inside the unit. NSW Fire and Rescue were called and they gained access. Once inside, Senior Constable Muriwai saw a severely decomposed body in the lounge room area.⁷ A crime scene was established.
16. There were no identified suspicious circumstances and the house appeared to be in order. Her purse, bankbook and an amount of cash were found undisturbed.

Identity

17. Police were aware from Department of Housing records that Lynne Barnett lived alone at the address where the body was found. Police also found multiple forms of identification belonging to Lynne inside the unit. Given the decomposition of her body,

⁵ Notebook statement of David Ayoub, Exhibit 1, Tab 10

⁶ Statement of Senior Constable Muriwai, dated 14 September 2017, exhibit 3

⁷ Statement of Senior Constable Paul Muriwai, Exhibit 1, Tab 5

a facial identification would have been difficult. Lynne's identity was later formally confirmed by fingerprint analysis.⁸

When and where did Lynne die?

18. While the decomposition change makes it clear that Lynne had been dead for some time prior to her discovery, it is difficult to pinpoint her time of death with any accuracy and the forensic pathologist who conducted the autopsy did not offer an estimate.
19. It is, however, known from police inquiries that Lynne was seen by other residents outside the unit block some time between Christmas 2016 and early January 2017.⁹ One resident described seeing her "weeks ago".¹⁰ However, the dates of these sightings are quite vague and very difficult to rely upon with any certainty.
20. It appears that Lynne had two cats, one of which was still alive, inside the unit. It is not clear on the evidence before me whether there was an open window or cat door at the property or if other residents fed the animal from time to time.¹¹ It is not clear what happened to the other cat.
21. On the balance, I am of the view that Lynne died sometime between 1 January and 27 February 2017. While it is clear that on 27 February 2017 Lynne had been dead for some time, it is impossible to know exactly when her death occurred or exactly when she was last sighted. For this reason the possible date range for the time of her death must necessarily remain broad.
22. There is nothing to suggest that her body had been moved and I find that she died in her own home at Unit 14/10 Seale Street, Burwood, NSW.

⁸ Statement of Kate Louise Reid, Exhibit 1, Tab 4

⁹ See Statement of Senior Constable Paul Muriwai, Exhibit 1, Tab 5, paragraph 5 and the notebook statement taken from David Ayoub, Exhibit 1, Tab 10

¹⁰ Notebook of Senior Constable Muriwai, Exhibit 1, Tab 10

¹¹ See narrative section of P79A form. Exhibit 1, Tab 1

What was the cause and manner of Lynne's death?

23. Lynne's body was taken to the Glebe Mortuary and an autopsy was conducted on 6 March 2017. The body was found to be in a state of "moderate to advanced decomposition change" with features of mummification.¹²
24. At autopsy, apart from probable fibrosis in the left ventricle of the heart, no obvious injuries or significant natural disease was able to be identified. The forensic pathologist was unable to identify a cause of death.
25. No alcohol, common medications or common drugs of abuse were detected on routine toxicological analysis.
26. Lynne was known to attend the Burwood Medical Centre and had been treated by Dr Sammy Kochan on several occasions. The last time that she attended the surgery was on 16 September 2016. She presented with a cough and was prescribed Rulide, an antibiotic. Medical records obtained note that she declined a chest x-ray. It appears that at some point Lynne had been diagnosed with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) ¹³ but nothing further is known in relation to this diagnosis. Lynne was apparently an ex-smoker. I note that the level of decomposition precluded a full investigation of her lungs.
27. Under the circumstances, it is impossible to say what caused Lynne's death. Given the lack of suspicious circumstances and the toxicological findings it is likely that her death was caused naturally. However, it remains possible that she was somehow incapacitated and unable to get help. There is no evidence suggesting suicide. In these circumstances the cause and manner of her death must remain an open finding.

Findings

28. On the balance of probabilities, I find that Lynne Barnett died between 1 January 2017 and 27 February 2017 at her home address of 14/10 Seale Street, Burwood. The cause and manner of her death remain unknown.

¹²Autopsy Report For the Coroner, Dr Jennifer Pokorny, Exhibit 1, Tab 2

¹³ See medical records at Exhibit 1, Tab 9

Finally, I offer my sincere condolences to her friends and neighbours, particularly to Mr Garvan Dormer who came to court and spoke so warmly of Lynne. The death of any citizen in circumstances such as this is distressing. Her death is a reminder of the importance of reaching out to those in our community who may lack social contact and support. Lynne Barnett's singing brought joy to many people and I have no doubt that she will be warmly remembered for that for many years to come.

Magistrate Harriet Grahame

Deputy State Coroner

14 September 2017