



## CORONERS COURT OF NEW SOUTH WALES

<b>Inquest:</b>	Inquest into the death of Christina Burgess
<b>Hearing date:</b>	16 March 2020
<b>Date of findings:</b>	16 March 2020
<b>Place of findings:</b>	NSW Coroners Court - Lidcombe
<b>Findings of:</b>	Magistrate Elizabeth Ryan, Deputy State Coroner
<b>Catchwords:</b>	CORONIAL LAW – person found deceased – can cause and manner of death be established?
<b>File number:</b>	2014/240072
<b>Representation:</b>	Coronial Advocate assisting the inquest: Sgt S Harding.
<b>Findings:</b>	<p><b>Identity</b> The person who died is Christina Burgess</p> <p><b>Date of death</b> Christina Burgess died between May 2018 and 29 August 2018.</p> <p><b>Place of death</b> The location of Christina Burgess' death is 1 Garden Square, Gordon NSW.</p> <p><b>Cause of death</b> The cause of Christina Burgess' death is unknown.</p> <p><b>Manner of death</b> The manner of Christina Burgess' death is unknown.</p>

Section 81(1) of the *Coroners Act 2009 (NSW)* [the Act] 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 Christina Burgess.

### **Introduction**

1. On 29 August 2018 Christina Burgess aged 50 years was found deceased inside her mother's home at Gordon in Sydney. Her mother Norma Burgess no longer lived there, having moved to a retirement home in 2012. Christina Burgess had last been seen in May 2018 by people who were working in the premises next door to Norma Burgess' home.
2. Unfortunately an autopsy examination has not been able to establish a cause of Christina Burgess' death, and for this reason an inquest is mandatory.

### **Christina Burgess' life**

3. Christina Burgess was born on 25 July 1968. She had a brother Christopher who died in 2006. Little is known about Christina's life, as she was very reclusive. In the years leading up to her death almost the only person known to have retained contact with her was her late brother's wife Catherine Andrews. After Christopher Burgess' death in 2006 contact between Catherine and Christina was by way of phone calls only.
4. Police records show that in 2012 a person, presumed to be Christina, made a distressed call to police to say that she could no longer cope with caring for her elderly mother and was afraid she would kill both herself and her mother. When police attended the address, which was Christina's apartment in Cremorne, they found it to be unkempt and extremely messy, with piles of rubbish in all places. Christina's mother Norma was lying in bed, disoriented and confused.
5. Police took Christina to North Shore Hospital for a mental health assessment. According to the hospital records, she gave a history of depression, anxiety and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and acknowledged being a hoarder of rubbish. She was considered to be safe for discharge, with a referral made to a Community Mental Health Team. It is not known whether Christina ever engaged with this or any other service.
6. It appears that after this crisis Norma Burgess went to live in an aged care home. For some years Christina attempted to manage her mother's and her own affairs. However in February 2018 the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal made orders giving Power of Attorney for Norma's affairs to the NSW Trustee and Guardian, due to Christina being unable to manage them. Once the order was made Christina did not respond to any attempts by the NSW Trustee and Guardian to contact her. The aged care home where Norma lived told police that until December 2017 Christina had visited her mother regularly, but had not visited since then.

## The apartment at Cremorne

7. On 29 August 2018 a contractor with the NSW Trustee and Guardian was engaged to clean out Norma Burgess' house in Gordon. The house was described as uninhabitable, with holes in the floorboards and ceiling, mould on the walls, and an unclean odour. Inside the main bedroom the contractor found Christina's body, lying amid rubbish that reached from knee to waist height.
8. After Christina's body was found and identified, police attended the one bedroom apartment in Cremorne which Christina had purchased in 2008. The apartment was piled with bags of decomposing food and rubbish in a similar manner to that of the house in Gordon. No neighbours had ever seen Christina although they were aware of her presence. The strata company which managed her apartment block advised that she was in arrears for strata fees, and was facing bankruptcy proceedings.
9. In a bag near the kitchen, police located a handwritten letter addressed to Catherine Andrews and a firm of solicitors. It was undated. It began:

*'I am writing this to explain why I must take the course of action I have decided upon. I cannot take anymore. Everything in my life is totally out of control and without immediate family, any close friends or support from a loved one it has become impossible.'*
10. In her letter Christina went on to state that she could no longer look after herself, had no money and couldn't pay her bills. She expressed her deep love for her mother, and her sadness that she could not help her any more. She wrote that she felt *'isolated and alone and worthless'*, and hoped she would see her mother in heaven *'where we will both be made whole again'*.
11. A mobile phone was found in the apartment, with the last dialed call from the phone on 24 February 2018, to Adam Leigh. Mr Leigh was contacted, and told police he had met Christina the previous year and had sometimes taken food to her home. He had urged her to clean up her apartment. He last attempted to contact her on 5 March 2018, with a text that went unanswered.

## The autopsy report

12. An autopsy was performed by forensic pathologist Dr Lorraine Du Toit-Prinsloo. She was unable to ascertain a cause of death due to the degree of decomposition which had occurred. She was however able to confirm that no injuries or fractures were present on the preserved area of the body or the skeleton.
13. Checks made with Medicare indicated that Christina had not visited a doctor for several years; hence no medical records were available which might indicate if she had any underlying illness.

## **Time, place, cause and manner**

14. Due to the state of the evidence I am unable to establish the cause of Christina's death. It is very unlikely that further evidence about this will become available.
15. As to the manner of death, the very sad letter found at Christina's apartment in Cremorne shows that she was finding her life unbearable and had decided to take some unnamed course of action. It can be inferred that she was referring to suicide. However because the letter is undated it cannot be established if it this remained her state of mind and her intention at the time of her death. I have therefore concluded that the manner of Christina's death must remain unascertained.
16. Unfortunately even the date of Christina's death cannot be determined with accuracy. It can be presumed she was still alive at some date in May 2018 when she was last seen, at her mother's house. For this reason the date of her death must be given as between May 2018 and 29 August 2018.

## **Conclusion**

17. Christina's life in particular in its last months seems to have been one of great isolation and sadness. I hope she is now at peace.
18. I thank the Coronial Advocate Sergeant Sasha Harding for her assistance with this inquest.

## **Findings required by s81(1)**

As a result of considering all of the documentary evidence and the oral evidence heard at the inquest, I make the following findings.

### **Identity**

The person who died is Christina Burgess

### **Date of death**

Christina Burgess died between May 2018 and 29 August 2018.

### **Place of death**

The location of Christina Burgess' death is 1 Garden Square, Gordon NSW.

### **Cause of death**

The cause of Christina Burgess' death is unknown.

### **Manner of death**

The manner of Christina Burgess' death is unknown.

I close this Inquest.

**Magistrate E Ryan**  
Deputy State Coroner  
Lidcombe  
16 March 2020