



**CORONER'S COURT
OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

Inquest:	Inquest into the death of Sharon Edwards
Hearing dates:	27 July 2023
Date of findings:	27 July 2023
Place of findings:	Coroner's Court of New South Wales, Lidcombe
Findings of:	Magistrate Derek Lee, Deputy State Coroner
Catchwords:	CORONIAL LAW – cause and manner of death, homicide, mandatory inquest
File number:	2020/60636
Representation:	Ms K Mackay, Coronial Advocate Assisting the Coroner
Findings:	<p>Sharon Edwards died on or about 14 March 2015. Ms Edwards died as a result of at least one episode of interpersonal violence. The manner of death is therefore homicide.</p> <p>However, the available evidence does not allow for any finding to be made as to the place of Ms Edwards' death.</p> <p>The available evidence, and the absence of any post-mortem examination, also does not allow for any finding to be made as to the precise cause of Ms Edwards' death.</p>

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 On the evening of 14 March 2015, Sharon Edwards was out socialising with friends in South Grafton. Ms Edwards had recently resumed a former relationship, was in good spirits and was enjoying the company of the persons she was with. Later that evening, Ms Edwards returned home to find the car of her estranged husband, John Edwards, parked in the garage. There had been a recent history of disagreement between Ms Edwards and Mr Edwards which prompted Ms Edwards to leave briefly to drop off the persons she was with, before returning home.
- 1.2 What occurred after Ms Edwards returned home is not known. However, Mr Edwards later reported Ms Edwards as a missing person. An extensive police investigation followed. Evidence was gathered which suggested that the circumstances of Ms Edwards going missing occurred in suspicious circumstances. Eventually, Mr Edwards was charged with the murder of Ms Edwards. Ms Edwards has, to date, not been found.

2. Why was an inquest held?

- 2.1 Under the *Coroners Act 2009* (**the Act**) a Coroner has the responsibility to investigate all reportable deaths. This investigation is conducted primarily so that a Coroner can answer questions that are required to answer pursuant to the Act, namely: the identity of the person who died, when and where they died, and what was the cause and the manner of that person's death.
- 2.2 Section 27(1)(a) of the Act provides that an inquest is mandatory if it appears to a coroner that a person died or might have died as a result of homicide. Given the criminal proceedings commenced by prosecution authorities against Mr Edwards, and because Ms Edwards has not been found, it is mandatory to hold an inquest into Ms Edwards' death. This is because the precise cause of her death and the place of her death have not been sufficiently disclosed in accordance with sections 27(1)(c) and (d) of the Act.
- 2.3 In this context it should be recognised at the outset that the operation of the Act, and the coronial process in general, represents an intrusion by the State into what is usually one of the most traumatic events in the lives of family members who have lost a loved one. At such times, it is reasonably expected that families will wish to attempt to cope with the consequences of such a traumatic event in private. The loss experienced by family members does not diminish significantly over time. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that both the coronial process and an inquest by their very nature unfortunately compel a family to re-live distressing memories and to do so in a public forum.
- 2.4 It should also be noted at the outset that although the evidence gathered during a coronial investigation may give rise to the appearance that a person has died as a result of homicide, such a conclusion (if one is eventually made) does not impose any criminal liability on any person. Indeed, section 81(3) of the Act explicitly precludes a coroner from making a finding that indicates, or in any way suggests, that a criminal offence has been committed by any person. It should be remembered that the functions of the coronial jurisdiction are, in this way, entirely separate from the functions of the criminal jurisdiction.

3. Ms Edwards' life

- 3.1 Inquests and the coronial process are as much about life as they are about death. A coronial system exists because we, as a community, recognise the fragility of human life and value enormously the preciousness of it. Understanding the impact that the death of a person has had on those closest to that person only comes from knowing something of that person's life. Therefore, it is important to recognise and acknowledge Ms Edwards' life in a brief, but hopefully meaningful, way.
- 3.2 Ms Edwards was born on 1 March 1960. She had three sons and is described as a devoted and loving mother and grandmother. Ms Edwards had many years of dedicated service working as a school teacher, and enjoyed the admiration of her students.
- 3.3 Ms Edwards had many friends and was a respected member of the wider community in Grafton where she lived. She was known to be generous and caring, and her love of life was matched by the love that others had for her.
- 3.4 It is heartbreaking to know that Ms Edwards was taken so suddenly and unexpectedly from those closest to her and that some uncertainty still surrounds Ms Edwards' death. However, there is little doubt that the positive impression that Ms Edwards has left with so many family members, loved ones, friends and persons she encountered during her life will remain as a lasting and cherished memory.

4. Background to the events of 14 and 15 March 2015

- 4.1 Ms Edwards and Mr Edwards met while studying at a teacher's college in Sydney. They later married in 1982 and had three sons together. Early in their marriage, Ms Edwards had an affair with William Mills, the coach of her touch football team.
- 4.2 In 1987, Mr and Ms Edwards moved to Lawrence, a small town about 30 kilometres north east of Grafton. Mr Edwards told a friend that he "absolutely hated" Mr Mills and that one of the reasons he and Ms Edwards moved to Lawrence was to get away from him. Following the move, Ms Edwards lost contact with Mr Mills.
- 4.3 Mr Edwards and Ms Edwards worked as school teachers in the Grafton area. Mr Edwards retired in 2011.
- 4.4 Sometime in late 2013, Ms Edwards reconnected with Mr Mills over social media and they later formed a loving relationship. Ms Edwards travelled to Sydney on occasion and would meet up and stay with Mr Mills.
- 4.5 By at least early 2014, the relationship between Ms Edwards and Mr Edwards had deteriorated to the point where Ms Edwards was unhappy in her marriage. In February 2014, Ms Edwards obtained advice about the likely outcome of a property settlement.

- 4.6 In October 2014, Ms Edwards moved into a house in Riverdale Court, Grafton. The house was purchased with money inherited by Mr Edwards from his mother. An arrangement was made for Ms Edwards to live at Riverdale Court whilst Mr Edwards lived in Lawrence.
- 4.7 During this period, Mr and Ms Edwards had contrasting views regarding the nature of their relationship. On the one hand, Mr Edwards considered that the relationship had been “good”, and was of the belief that he and Ms Edwards had a plan to renovate the Lawrence property so that it could be rented out, whilst the two of them would live in the Riverdale Court property together. Mr Edwards later reported that Ms Edwards had indicated that she did not like the Riverdale Court property house and wanted to move back to Lawrence with him.
- 4.8 On the other hand, Ms Edwards reportedly told a close friend that her marriage was over and that she wanted to live alone at the Riverdale Court property. During this period Ms Edwards regularly sent Facebook messages to her friend indicating that she had tried on several occasions to talk to Mr Edwards about ending their marriage but that he refused to discuss it. Ms Edwards also indicated that she did not intend to divorce Mr Edwards but wanted to separate from him, and that she had sought advice from an accountant because she wanted to be financially independent. By early 2015, Ms Edwards spoke to friends about buying a house in Forster and retiring there with Mr Mills.
- 4.9 Despite Ms Edwards’ intention to live a separate life, Mr Edwards frequently visited Riverdale Court purportedly to perform chores in the garden for her. However, it is that Mr Edwards was instead attempting to monitor Ms Edwards’ activities. By way of example, on one occasion Mr Edwards attended unexpectedly at night on the pretext of mowing the lawn the following morning. However, he left the next day without doing so.
- 4.10 Between 11 and 13 March 2015, Ms Edwards attended a work-related course in Sydney. On 13 March 2015, Ms Edwards travelled to Coffs Harbour and met Mr Mills who was there for a touch football tournament. They had dinner at the home of a friend of Ms Edwards and stayed the night there. Ms Edwards told her friend that she had instructed Mr Edwards not to visit the house at Riverdale Court because she and Mr Mills planned be there. Mr Edwards reportedly did not respond to this.

5. The events of 14 and 15 March 2015

- 5.1 On 14 March 2015, Ms Edwards drove back to Grafton and then visited her father in Lawrence. Mr Mills drove to South Grafton to meet a friend, with the intention of meeting up with Ms Edwards in the evening for drinks. After playing tennis in the afternoon, Ms Edwards returned to Riverdale Court and met Mr Mills and his friend at a licenced premises in South Grafton. On the same day, Mr Edwards was seen at the Riverdale Court property, painting a planter box and retaining wall in the front yard. He was seen again later in the day back at the property at 6:45pm.
- 5.2 At around 7:15pm, Mr Edwards drove to central Grafton and withdrew money from an ATM. He called Ms Edwards and became aware that she was out with other people including Mr Mills and that she wanted them to stay overnight at Riverdale Court. Mr Edwards indicated that this could not occur as he was going to stay at Riverdale Court.

- 5.3 Mr Edwards drove around Grafton looking for Ms Edwards and eventually saw her car parked outside a licensed premises. Mr Edwards reportedly called Ms Edwards again and repeated his position that the people that she was with were not to stay at Riverdale Court. Mr Edwards drove his car to Riverdale Court and parked his car in the garage where Ms Edwards would usually park her car.
- 5.4 After leaving the hotel, Ms Edwards and Mr Mills ordered takeaway food and went to the home of Mr Mill's friend. They reportedly stayed until around 10:30pm to 11:00pm, and Ms Edwards and Mr Mills drove to the Riverdale Court property.
- 5.5 Upon arriving, Mr Mills saw that the lights in the house were off but Ms Edwards saw that Mr Edwards's vehicle was parked in the garage when it would usually be parked outside. They decided not to enter the property and Ms Edwards drove Mr Mills back to South Grafton where he would stay the night at his friend's house. Mr Mills held Ms Edwards' hand, kissed her and said goodbye. This is the last time that Mr Mills saw Ms Edwards before she returned to Riverdale Court.

6. Subsequent events

- 6.1 At 8:10am on 15 March 2015, Mr Edwards began sending numerous text messages and making calls to Ms Edwards' phone. Some of the text messages referred to Mr Edwards requesting that any persons at the Riverdale Court property to leave, and that he had arrived at the premises at 9:00am to find the front door open.
- 6.2 Also on 15 March 2015, Mr Edwards contacted his sons to ask if they had heard from their mother.
- 6.3 On 16 March 2015, Mr Edwards went to the school where Ms Edwards worked and expressed the belief that Ms Edwards was missing. One of the employees at the school enquired whether Mr Edwards had phoned any of local hospitals to make any enquiries regarding this. Mr Edwards said that he had not. The employee provided Mr Edwards with the relevant phone numbers to make such enquiries.
- 6.4 However, Mr Edwards did not contact any local hospitals. He also did not contact any of Ms Edwards' friends or notify her father that he believed she was missing.
- 6.5 Mr Edwards did not contact his sons again before reporting Ms Edwards as missing on 17 March 2015.

7. Mobile phone data

- 7.1 As part of the police investigation, data for the mobile phones belonging to Mr Edwards and Ms Edwards were obtained and reviewed. The data indicated that Ms Edwards' phone was in the vicinity of a base station covering the Riverdale Court area at different times between 12:35am and 3:04am on 15 March 2015. Mr Edwards's phone was also found to be in the vicinity of the Riverdale Court area at 3:17am on 15 March 2015.

7.2 At 4:04am, Ms Edwards' phone was noted to be in the vicinity of a base station at Junction Hill, north of Grafton. Between 4:09am and 4:22am the phones of both Ms Edwards and Mr Edwards were in the vicinity of a base station near Lawrence. Further, Ms Edwards' phone and Mr Edward phone were noted to be in the vicinity of the same base station at 5:09am and 5:23am, respectively. No further activity on Ms Edwards' phone was noted after 5:09am on 15 March 2015.

8. Versions of events provided by Mr Edwards

8.1 Mr Edwards provided a number of versions regarding the events of 14 to 15 March 2015. They can be relevantly summarised as follows:

- (a) On 16 March 2015, Mr Edwards told the principal at Ms Edwards' school that he had not seen Ms Edwards all weekend and that he had parked his car in the garage at the Riverdale Court property in order to discourage Mr Mills from staying there. Mr Edwards indicated that he heard the garage door open and close on 14 March 2015.
- (b) On 16 March 2015, Mr Edwards attended Grafton police station and told a police officer that Ms Edwards had "*turned up with this bloke*", that he told them to leave and that this was the last time that he saw Ms Edwards.
- (c) On 17 March 2015, Mr Edwards attended Grafton police station again and told a different police officer that he had been at the Riverdale Court property when Ms Edwards arrived alone and was angry because she wanted her friends to stay at the house. Mr Edwards reported that after Ms Edwards went to bed, he switched their cars in the garage before returning to the property at Lawrence.
- (d) Mr Edwards told his neighbours in Lawrence that he did not see Ms Edwards at all on 14 March 2015 and that he stayed the night at Riverdale Court until around 5:00am on 15 March 2015 when he drove back to Lawrence.
- (e) On the afternoon of 17 March 2015, Mr Edwards returned to Grafton police station and took part in an electronically recorded interview. During that interview, Mr Edwards said that he was at the Riverdale Court property watching TV when he heard the garage door open and close. He reported that Ms Edwards returned several hours later and that she was unhappy with him. Mr Edwards claimed that he moved Ms Edwards' car into the garage and then returned to Lawrence.
- (f) Mr Edwards reportedly told two of his sons that Ms Edwards arrived at the Riverdale Court property on 14 March 2015 and that he had a discussion with her regarding the attendance of Mr Mills. Mr Edwards provided different versions regarding whether the purported discussion with Ms Edwards was calm or argumentative.
- (g) On 20 March 2015, Mr Edwards told a friend that during the last time that he had seen Ms Edwards they had an argument. On 5 April 2015, Mr Edwards told the same friend that he was sure that Ms Edwards was deceased and expressed the belief that she had hired a hitman to kill him but that this had "*backfired*", resulting in her being killed instead.

- (h) A media appeal was held on 1 April 2015. Mr Edwards told the media that he was the last person to see Ms Edwards alive on 14 March 2015 and at the time she was “okay”. Mr Edwards said that she had caught up with some friends that night and that he had returned to the house in Lawrence.
- (i) In early 2016, police explained the data obtained from the phones of Mr Edwards and Ms Edwards to their sons. They later visited their father in Lawrence discussed this information with him. Mr Edwards “brought up the hitman again” and asserted that he did not have his phone with him on 14 March 2015 but that he had found it on his lawn the following morning. On another occasion in 2016, Mr Edwards reportedly told one of his sons, “I should have went home. Your mother would be alive if I went home”.

9. Other circumstantial evidence

9.1 During the course of the police investigation, other circumstantial evidence was gathered which can be relevantly summarised follows:

- (a) There were only two keys to Ms Edwards’ vehicle. One key was found in a dresser at the Riverdale Court property. The other key was not found when police searched the property. On 2 April 2015, Mr Edwards told police that he found the second key shortly after regaining access to the Lawrence property on 19 March 2015. Mr Edwards provided the key to his solicitor, indicating that the police were not interested in it. However, there is no record of Mr Edwards ever having offered the key to police.
- (b) Ms Edwards’ nightdress was found in the footwell of Mr Edwards’s vehicle. He told police that he used it to clean his vehicle.
- (c) Mr Edwards sustained a three centimetre laceration to the back of his right hand at the base of the knuckle on his fourth finger. He also sustained a fracture to his fifth metacarpal. Mr Edwards told his general practitioner and two radiographers that he sustained the fracture whilst trying to lift a heavy stone in the garden which ended up crushing his hand on the ground. Mr Edwards went on to assert that the laceration was caused by a Stanley knife that was lying on the ground. Mr Edwards indicated that this happened around the beginning of March 2015 and that he had put in a suture which he later removed himself.

However, expert medical evidence from two orthopaedic surgeons established that the type of fracture sustained by Mr Edwards most often occurred by a person using a clenched fist to strike a hard object. Such an injury is known as a “boxer’s fracture” and was unlikely to have been caused by a crush injury as described by Mr Edwards. Based on the lack of healing, it was considered more likely that the injury occurred on 14 March 2015 rather than in early March 2015 as suggested by Mr Edwards.

Further, it is common for a laceration to occur in conjunction with a boxer’s fracture. This is known as a “fight bite” as such a laceration can occur when a person’s tooth comes into contact with another person’s knuckle when being punched in the face. In addition, a crush

injury sustained by dropping a heavy object would have more likely caused marked bruising and abrasions rather than a single laceration.

10. Criminal proceedings

- 10.1 In June 2017, following an extensive police investigation, Mr Edwards was charged with murdering Ms Edwards.
- 10.2 Mr Edwards later pleaded not guilty and a trial commenced on 30 October 2019 before a jury. On 22 November 2019, Mr Edwards was found guilty.
- 10.3 On 18 December 2019, Mr Edwards was sentenced to 24 years imprisonment commencing on 20 June 2017 and expiring on 19 June 2041, with a non-parole period of 18 years expiring on 19 June 2035.
- 10.4 The coronial proceedings regarding Ms Edwards' death were suspended pursuant to section 78 of the Act on 22 April 2020.
- 10.5 Following an appeal made by Mr Edwards to the Court of Criminal Appeal in October 2021, the criminal proceedings in relation to Ms Edwards were finally determined on 14 February 2022.

11. Is Ms Edwards deceased?

- 11.1 In the case of any person who has been reported to a Coroner as a missing person, the primary finding which a Coroner must make is whether that person is now deceased. If such a finding is made, then a Coroner will go on to consider whether any findings can be made regarding the date and place of the person's death, and the cause and manner of their deaths.
- 11.2 Although Ms Edwards was reported as a missing person, the evidence gathered during the subsequent police investigation does not support this assertion. Ms Edwards was known to love her work and her family, and she had a very active social life. After reconnecting with Mr Mills, she had developed a loving relationship with him. Ms Edwards had a good relationship with her children, with one of her sons describing their mother as "*probably the happiest she'd ever been*" in the period before 14 March 2015. Ms Edwards adored her new granddaughter who had been born in April 2014.
- 11.3 There is also evidence that Ms Edwards had been making plans for her future. She was involved in organising a big school reunion, and had booked and paid for an overseas holiday later in 2015. She was also looking forward to the wedding for one of her sons in Bali in May 2015.
- 11.4 The police investigation did not identify any evidence that after 14 March 2015 Ms Edwards had accessed her financial accounts or other services which she typically accessed regularly. There is no evidence that Ms Edwards used her mobile phone or social media accounts after 15 March 2015. In addition, Ms Edwards was known to be a dedicated teacher and had never previously not attended work without explanation. No other signs of life in relation to Ms Edwards have been identified by police. Given the close relationships that Ms Edwards enjoyed with her family and

friends, there is no plausible reason why she did not maintain contact with them after 14 March 2015.

11.5 Having regard to the above matters, and to the evidence gathered by police as part of the criminal investigation which has been summarised above, the conclusion that must be reached is that Ms Edwards is deceased.

12. Can any finding be made as to the date, place, cause or manner of Ms Edwards' death?

12.1 The following evidence established that it is more probable than not that Ms Edwards died as a result of homicide:

- (a) the absence of any plausible evidence that Ms Edwards voluntarily ceased all contact with her family, friends and loved ones;
- (b) the absence of any plausible evidence that Ms Edwards might have inflicted her own death – as noted above, Ms Edwards had shown no signs of any underlying mental disturbance or condition that might have contributed to thoughts of self-harm; to the contrary, those closest to her observed her to be the happiest that they had seen her;
- (c) the absence of any plausible evidence to indicate that Ms Edwards died from accident or misadventure, in circumstances where if such an event had occurred it is most likely that Ms Edwards would have been found during the extensive investigation which followed after she was reported as missing;
- (d) the deterioration of the relationship between Ms Edwards and Mr Edwards in the period leading up to 14 March 2015, and Mr Edwards expressed dislike of Mr Mills and Ms Edwards' relationship with him;
- (e) the conflicting and irreconcilable versions of events provided by Mr Edwards regarding the events of 14 and 15 March 2015;
- (f) the data which establishes the mobile phones of Mr Edwards and Ms Edwards being in similar locations in Junction Hill and Lawrence on the evening of 14 March 2015 and the early hours of the morning on 15 March 2015;
- (g) the numerous text messages sent by Mr Edwards on 15 March 2015 which purport to assert ignorance of certain events of the previous 24 hours;
- (h) the circumstantial evidence regarding the key to the Riverdale Court property found to be in Mr Edwards's possession, and an item of Ms Edwards' clothing being found in Mr Edwards's vehicle; and
- (i) the injuries to Mr Edwards's right hand and the expert medical evidence which is inconsistent with the description given by Mr Edwards as to how the injuries were sustained, but consistent with the injuries having been sustained as a result of interpersonal violence.

- 12.2 Using the data gathered from the phones of Ms Edwards and Mr Edwards, police conducted an extensive search of the large area generally west of Lawrence. The area is noted to have swamps, dams and rugged bushland where a person's body could be disposed of so that it would be unlikely to be found. Despite these searches, and canvassing of other areas, Ms Edwards has not been found.
- 12.3 Therefore, the available evidence does not allow for any precise finding to be made as to the date of Ms Edwards' death other than it occurred on or about 14 March 2015. This is the last time that she was seen alive by Mr Mills before returning to Riverdale Court.
- 12.4 As Ms Edwards' has not been found the available evidence does not allow for any finding to be made as to the place of her death. Whilst the evidence indicates that it is most likely that upon returning to the Riverdale Court Property there was some confrontation between Mr Edwards and Ms Edwards which resulted in her death, it is not known whether Ms Edwards died in Grafton or in Lawrence or in another location.
- 12.5 Equally, as obviously no post-mortem examination has been conducted, there is no medical evidence from which a finding can be made as to the precise cause of Ms Edwards' death. As noted above, the evidence establishes that interpersonal violence resulted in Ms Edwards' death but the nature of any fatal injuries and pathology causing death cannot be precisely determined.

13. Findings

- 13.1 Before turning to the findings that I am required to make, I would like to acknowledge, and express my gratitude to Ms Karissa Mackay, Coronial Advocate, for her excellent assistance both before, and during, the inquest.
- 13.2 I also thank the police officer-in-charge of the investigation, Detective Senior Constable Douglas Scott, for his role in the police investigation and for compiling the brief of evidence.
- 13.3 The findings I make under section 81(1) of the Act are:

Identity

The person who died was Sharon Edwards.

Date of death

Ms Edwards died on or about 14 March 2015.

Place of death

The available evidence does not allow for any finding to be made as to the place of Ms Edwards' death.

Cause of death

The available evidence, and the absence of any post-mortem examination, does not allow for any finding to be made as to the precise cause of Ms Edwards' death.

Manner of death

Ms Edwards died as a result of at least one episode of interpersonal violence. The manner of death is therefore homicide.

13.4 On behalf of the Coroner's Court of New South Wales, I offer my sincere and respectful condolences, to the families, friends and loved ones of Ms Edwards for their devastating loss in such tragic circumstances.

13.5 I close this inquest.

Magistrate Derek Lee
Deputy State Coroner
27 July 2023
Coroners Court of New South Wales