

Truth for all to see of dying Miss Dhu

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Hardly anyone believed Deon Ruffin when he said his young girlfriend had died in agony in a remote lockup in August 2014 while police dismissed her cries and hospital staff treated her as a liar.

His story seemed far-fetched, and he had a dubious personality. A month later Malcolm Wilson, an old Aborigine from a -remote community, said he was in the cell next to the tiny young woman and he heard her groaning in pain and begging to go to hospital.

The truth is all this and worse.

Two and a half years after the death of the 22-year-old Aboriginal woman known for cultural reasons as Miss Dhu, her family has won its fight to let Australians see the truth about her last days.

The West Australian coroner yesterday released CCTV footage of the dying woman disbelieved to her last breath, and made direct criticisms of the hospital that treated her twice but failed to diagnose the infection that was killing her.

The infection took hold in a rib that cracked when Ruffin, the inquest had heard, beat her and threw her on the ground.

In the footage from the South Hedland watchhouse in Western Australia's northern Pilbara -region, an officer drops her on her head when she is too weak to sit up. At 10.31am on August 4, 2014, Miss Dhu is close to paralysis from the overwhelming staphylococcal infection that will kill her that afternoon and Constable Christopher Matier tells his boss, Sergeant Rick Bond: "She's poured her coffee over the floor and everything." In fact, it was Miss Dhu's vomit he had seen on the floor of her cell.

In a final disturbing scene from inside the watchhouse that day, Miss Dhu is dragged along the floor to a police van.

Police pegged Miss Dhu as a methamphetamine user from the moment of her arrest for unpaid fines on August 2. There was a -belief among officers that she was feigning illness to get out of the lockup. By the morning of August 4, they had already taken her to the hospital twice and twice the medical staff had sent her back to jail with a certificate declaring she was fit to be in custody. Nurse Samantha Dunn had rolled her eyes at Miss Dhu and doctor Anne Lang wrote "behavioural -issues" on her notes.

Why did they do this? The -inquest heard it might have something to do with what police had said about Miss Dhu when they first took her to the hospital on August 2, though coroner Ros Fogliani stresses the hospital staff should have made their own -assessments.

"I am satisfied that the escorting police provided Dr Lang with information to the effect that when Ms Dhu learnt that she would have to spend time incarcerated there

was an increase in her complaint of pain and of the severity of that pain," Fogliani wrote in her findings.

On the evening of August 3, when Fogliani's judgment says Miss Dhu could still have lived if medical staff had diagnosed her correctly, duty emergency doctor Vafa Naderi examined her and his discharge diagnosis read: "? Withdrawal from drugs" and "behavioural issues".

Nobody even took her temperature, which Fogliani is satisfied would have showed she was febrile. An X-ray would have shown pneumonia. She could still have been saved, Fogliani found.

Instead, certificates from the hospital declaring Miss Dhu fit for custody made police feel they were right. Back at the lockup, shortly after noon on August 4, Miss Dhu was a little more than an hour from death. CCTV footage recorded at 12.18pm shows Bond speaking to his colleague Constable Carre Sharples about the symptoms Miss Dhu said she had, making it obvious he did not believe her. "She can't feel her body, her whole body is numb. She can't sit up. She can't feel her legs. You name it," he says.

A minute later, Bond is talking to a detainee in the charge room and referring to Miss Dhu as a cautionary tale. "You take drugs? Cause I'll go and show you something. That's what happens when you take drugs. You end up like this woman in here. Good deterrent not to take drugs," Bond says.

A total of 11 officers have been put through disciplinary measures for their conduct over those three days. WA Police Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan said yesterday the officers failed to treat Miss Dhu with the compassion and dignity she deserved. However, no officer has been sacked or charged with a criminal offence and this has disappointed Miss Dhu's family. They are also disappointed that nobody from the Hedland Health Campus - built at the height of the resources -investment boom - is facing further action.

Indigenous academic Marcia Langton said she agreed with Miss Dhu's family that justice had not been done for her. Her treatment by authorities was consistent with the treatment of too many domestic violence victims and she wanted to help the family pursue their cause, Langton said. "So many indigenous women don't get the assistance of police or the hospital system when they have been the victim of violence," she said.