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No charges, so justice fails us: family

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WA's police chief has admitted police failed Ms Dhu in the days and hours that led to her agonising death in custody and said officers would no longer hold fine defaulters in police lock-ups so they could pay off their debts.

His comments came after the release of police lock-up security vision, which revealed the 22-year-old woman's final hours, and damning findings by the Coroner, who investigated the circumstances surrounding Ms Dhu's death.

It shows Ms Dhu dropped on to a concrete floor and dragged, limp, by two officers and put into the back of a police van.

Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan issued a mandate that unless officers can find a prison bed, a "warrant of commitment", which allows someone with outstanding court fines to pay off the debt with time inside, would not be acted on by police.

That time would no longer be served in police lock-ups, he said.

Ms Dhu, a Yamatji woman, died from septicaemia and pneumonia in August 2014, three days after she was locked up for failing to pay just over \$3000 in fines.

Ms Dhu's emotional family said that despite the long inquest they still felt justice had bypassed them because Coroner Ros Fogliani had made no recommendation for criminal charges against police or medical staff.

"(I was hoping for) justice and I still haven't got it," Ms Dhu's mother Della Roe said.

The Coroner was scathing about the treatment of the young woman on August 2, 3 and 4, 2014 at the Hedland Health Campus and the South Hedland police station. She described it as appalling, unprofessional and inhumane.

Ms Dhu had an infection that developed from broken ribs inflicted on her by her partner. Police security vision showed her complaining of excruciating pain from the moment she entered the station.

The Coroner found "to varying degrees, most of the police officers responsible for her welfare believed she was feigning her symptoms". That belief continued even as they pushed Ms Dhu's body into an emergency ward while she was in cardiac arrest.

Ms Fogliani noted the death "unleashed a wave of grief that has reverberated throughout the Aboriginal communities".

Mr O'Callaghan's order to police officers is likely to put pressure on the State Government to permanently change the law surrounding fine defaulters in WA prisons.

Ms Fogliani said while she could pinpoint no overt racism in the treatment of Ms Dhu by police or medical staff, "it would be naive to deny the existence of societal patterns that lead to assumptions being formed in relation to Aboriginal persons".

"Some of the clinicians at Hedland Health Campus were affected by premature diagnostic closure, and errors were made," Ms Fogliani wrote.

"Ms Dhu's suffering as she lay close to death at the lock-up was compounded by the unprofessional and inhumane actions of some of the police officers there."

She said the death had been preventable, particularly if staff at the hospital had done their jobs properly on August 3.

"The errors and omissions giving rise to the missed opportunities ... relate to Ms Dhu being under-triaged, to the failure to record a full set of vital signs, and to the failure to perform appropriate investigations," she said.

In 11 recommendations, the Coroner called on the Government to scrap the practice of paying off fines behind bars altogether. She also called for fast-track reforms to provide alternatives to incarceration for low-level offenders.

"The question must surely be asked: what benefit does the community derive from the incarceration of indigent fine defaulters?" Ms Fogliani said.

WA Aboriginal Legal Service chief executive Dennis Eggington said Ms Dhu's death remained a "cruel injustice".

Director of Legal Advocacy at the Human Rights Law Centre, Ruth Barson, said Ms Dhu's treatment had been "cruel, degrading and inhumane".

Mr O'Callaghan said he would not revisit disciplinary action against the 11 officers involved in the custody of Ms Dhu, 10 of whom remain in the force.

But police had not fulfilled their duty to protect Ms Dhu's safety, welfare and dignity. "She was not treated with the right level of human compassion. I accept that we failed in this regard," he said.