

Veronica Nelson treated inhumanely before jail death, prison officer concedes



Prison officer Tracey Brown leaves the Coroners Court on Friday.

By Erin Pearson
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A prison officer responsible for Indigenous woman Veronica Nelson’s welfare before she was found dead in her cell told an inquest she failed in her duty of care and did not escalate concerns about the inmate’s ailing health despite receiving “chilling” intercom calls for help.

Tracey Brown was working the nightshift at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre on the evening of January 1, 2020, when Nelson – who was on remand for alleged shoplifting and bail offences – repeatedly used the prison intercom to call for help, at times wailing in distress.

But an inquest into Nelson’s death heard that instead of returning to check on Nelson after she was given pain relief at 1.30am, Brown told the new arrival nothing more could be done to help her, that she’d tried the nurse and that Nelson’s cries were keeping other prisoners awake.

“Did you not feel, policies aside, that on a human level, the right thing to do was to go down and check she is conscious?” counsel assisting the coroner Sharon Lacy asked.

“I wish I had,” Brown responded.

Nelson had arrived at the women’s maximum-security prison late on December 31, 2019, and spent the night in the medical unit after a nurse and prison officer raised concerns about her health. Throughout the night, Nelson buzzed staff 30 times for help.

After being medically cleared 24 hours later, she was moved to a cell in the general population Yarra unit where, Brown told the coroner, staff were not made aware Nelson was unwell or withdrawing severely from heroin.

CCTV shows Brown, nurse Atheana George and two other prison officers provide Nelson with paracetamol through a cell trap door about 1.30am. It was the last time staff saw her alive.

During Brown’s nightshift, the coroner heard Nelson went on to make nine further calls for help over the prison intercom, including a final two conversations Lacy described as “haunting” and “chilling”. Nothing was heard from Nelson after 4am. Her body was found later that morning.