

Guards' comments to Veronica Nelson as she was dying in prison were 'disgusting', inquest hears

Witness also tells Victorian inquest that failure to check on Nelson for hours on end was inappropriate



Veronica Nelson died in her cell at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre in January 2020 after making more than a dozen calls for help over the intercom system.

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Comments made by guards to Indigenous woman Veronica Nelson as she was dying in a Melbourne jail cell were “disgusting”, a supervisor at the prison has told an inquest.

The supervisor on Wednesday also told the inquest into Nelson’s death that she had previously spoken to guards about how they spoke to women.

Nelson died in her cell at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre in January 2020 after making more than a dozen calls over the intercom system for help.

The inquest has heard it took repeated requests from Nelson, who was screaming in pain from leg cramps, before she was given drinks, paracetamol and a blanket.

“It’s not an emergency, stop asking,” one guard told Nelson in recordings played at the inquest into her death.

She was also told to stop yelling because she was keeping other women awake.

Nelson's body was found three hours after her last call for help. She died from an undiagnosed condition in the context of drug withdrawals, for which she was receiving medication.

Leanne Reid, a supervisor in the medical unit at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, told the inquest the confronting intercom audio wasn't surprising to her because she knew the officers and previously had to speak to them about the way they spoke to each other, staff and women.

Veronica's family will suggest to the inquest the remarks reflected an attitude that she was "inferior and unimportant", their lawyers told Reid.

"I don't know if I'd use those words – you're probably being a bit more forgiving than me," Reid replied.

"I think it's disgusting behaviour and nobody should be treated or spoken to like that."

After a period in the prison's medical centre, Nelson was transferred to another unit so she could continue to be monitored.

Nelson was unwell, repeatedly telling prison officers she believed she had vomited up medication supposed to help her, the inquest heard.

She died three days after being taken into custody.

The failure to check on Nelson for hours on end was inappropriate, Reid said.

Reid said if she had been on duty she would have called for a senior officer and medical staff to help.

All deaths in custody are reported to the coroner for investigation and are also subject to an internal debriefing.

But despite significant involvement with Nelson Veronica during her first two days in custody, Reid wasn't asked to attend the debriefing. She said she would have expressed concerns if she had been.

Reid told the inquest she learned to check things more thoroughly after Nelson's death, not relying so heavily on her expectation of other people doing their job.

On Tuesday Reid criticised the quality of healthcare received by women in the prison's medical centre, saying it fell below community expectations.

"I don't think the care is of a high standard," she said, referring to care from doctors and nurses at the prison.

The process for women to be able to receive medical attention and then to receive medications is slow and cumbersome, she said.

Reid said concerns about inadequate care were discussed among staff in the unit, but no complaints were made over fears of retribution. Instead she and others tell women to complain to the health ombudsman, the inquest heard.

The inquest continues in the Victorian coroner's court.