Inquest Touching Upon the Death of Isobel Mary Williams

This is a resumed inquest into the death of Isobel Mary Williams.

The inquest was opened on 30th October 2014 and at that time I received evidence from Sgt Paul McDade as to Mrs Williams's identity. Her full name is Isobel Mary Williams, she was born on 28th March 1955 and held British Nationality. The question "who" has been answered but as coroner I must seek answers to the questions when and where did she die and how she come by her death?

In the interval since the inquest was opened inquiries have continued and a postmortem examination has been undertaken.

The proceedings today are conducted under the Coroner's Act 1988 (of England) as it applies in modified form in the Falkland Islands, and the Falkland Islands own Coroner's Rules 1995.

I shall call Sgt Gary Colin Webb to give evidence about the scene of Mrs Williams's death. I also give notice of my intention, under rule 33 of the Coroner's Rules 1995, to admit documentary evidence in the form of written statements provided by witnesses to the circumstances of Mrs Williams's death. This documentary evidence includes medical evidence. The persons who made the statements are not resident in the Falkland Islands and are not able to attend this inquest. In my opinion their evidence is not likely to be disputed. The documentary evidence I intend to admit is as follows:

Statement of Peter Stephen de Roeck – a passenger on the vessel Ushuaia - who describes seeing Mrs Williams falling down the stairs on the vessel.

Statement of Jean Eileen De Roeck – also a passenger on the MV Ushuaia - who saw Mrs Williams lying at the foot of the staircase after she had fallen.

[Statement of Andrew Stephen Rouse- one of the joint expedition leaders - who saw Mrs Williams after she had fallen and witnessed some of the arrangements made for her after her fall].

Statements of Monica Schillat – joint expedition leader - who assisted with arrangements for Mrs William's care after her fall.

Statements of Leandro Javier Gonzalez Miri – lecturer and expedition guide - who saw Mrs Williams immediately after she had fallen and later assisted in a reconstruction by demonstrating her position.

Statement of Gareth Williams – husband of Mrs Williams – in which he describes his wife and gives background information as well as an account of the care she was given after she had fallen.

Statement and medical report of Lynne Hoole – ship's doctor - who attended Mrs Williams after her fall and ultimately pronounced her dead.

Statements of Dr Julie Hunt –British Antarctic Survey Medical officer - who provided a detailed account of the treatment given to Mrs Williams after her fall and explained the treatment and care options available at the time.

Statement and report of Jorge Luis Aldegheri – Ship's captain who was in charge of the Ushuaia and recorded the events in the ship's log.

Postmortem Report prepared by Forensic Pathologist, Dr John Clark, in which he states his conclusion that Mrs Williams died from a fracture of her cervical spine, and it was entirely consistent with a fall down a flight of stairs as described by other witnesses.

If any person wishes to object to the admission of this documentary evidence, he or she should make the objection now. Similarly, if a person wishes to see a copy of the documentary evidence he or she should say so now. I ask any person seeking to object or wishing to see a copy of the documentary evidence to state how he or she claims to be within Rule 19. Are there any objections or requests for copy documentary evidence?

There being no objections and no requests to see copy documentary evidence, I shall call Sgt Webb and then read the statements and reports aloud and thus into the record of the inquiry.

This is my summary of the evidence:

At the time of her death Mrs Williams and her husband were passengers on board the cruise ship MV Ushuaia. On the evening of 22nd October, the ship was sailing in Jason Bay off South Georgia. Mr and Mrs Williams had dinner in the ship's dining room and after finishing her meal at about 8pm Mrs Williams left to return alone to their cabin on the deck above. Shortly afterwards a fellow passenger heard someone apparently falling down the stairs and witnessed Mrs Williams coming down the last couple of steps before landing on the corridor floor. She lay there on her back with her head and trunk on the floor, her legs bent and turned to the right, and her feet on the bottom step. Others quickly arrived including the ship's doctor, Dr Hoole, who ascertained that, although still conscious and speaking, Mrs Williams was unable to move and could not feel anything.

Dr Hoole suspected that Mrs Williams had injured her neck and applied a cervical collar and arranged for her to be moved by stretcher into the bar area, with support placed around her to counter the roll of the ship. The decision was taken to return to Grytvyken to get additional medical help, and in the meantime a more detailed clinical examination confirmed apparent cervical spine damage, with paralysis below about C4, albeit still with full consciousness and a Glasgow Coma Score of 15/15. Dr Hoole administered painkillers and remained with Mrs Williams throughout the night.

At about 7am the following morning, Thursday 23rd, the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) doctor on South Georgia, Dr Hunt, came on board and confirmed Dr Hoole's findings. The plan was thereafter for the boat to make for the Falkland Islands, to the nearest hospital, and in preparation for this it was decided to move Mrs Williams to a cabin where she would be more comfortable for the three-day journey. Before this was achieved, however, at about 9.30am and with a cervical collar in place, Mrs Williams suffered a sudden cardiac arrest. Immediate resuscitation was carried out, including intubation and administration of adrenaline via a cannula in her right arm, and she recovered.

consciousness and started breathing spontaneously. A drip was set up and the breathing tube removed, allowing her to speak. Shortly afterwards however, she suffered a second cardiac arrest and, although again resuscitated, she required further adrenaline support. An ECG showed a relatively normal, if slightly fast, heartbeat (sinus rhythm).

With Mrs Williams reasonably stabilised it was decided to leave for Stanley right away and the BAS doctor consequently went ashore, ensuring there were adequate medical supplies for the journey. At 11am, after the boat had set sail, there was a third cardiac arrest and a third successful resuscitation. Mrs Williams was already intubated but required increased amounts of adrenaline, followed later by ketamine and calcium chloride. Just before 1pm she suffered a fourth cardiac arrest, but although her heartbeat was restored her blood pressure remained low. Within a few minutes there was a further arrest from which she could not be resuscitated. All efforts were therefore stopped, and she was declared dead at 1.27pm on 23rd October 2014.

Dr Clark's postmortem examination confirmed that Mrs Williams had sustained a fracture of the cervical spine, between the 4th and 5th vertebrae, with associated substantial bleeding into the surrounding tissues. Dr Clark concluded that the fracture was entirely consistent with a fall down a flight of stairs as described by Mrs Williams and Mr De Roeck. He said the injury most likely occurred when she landed on the lower steps or ground, caused by her neck being jerked backwards and forwards.

Dr Clark concluded that it is not entirely clear what caused her to suffer the series of ultimately fatal cardiac arrests, but it may have been due to tissue swelling from the neck injury causing sufficient pressure to provoke reflex stopping of breathing and heartbeat and there may have been a contribution from the associated bleeding in her throat. In his view the emergency care Mrs Williams received appeared appropriate to her overall situation – on a moving boat and in a remote location far from proper hospital facilities.

My findings are that Mrs William's death was caused by a fracture of the cervical spine due to a fall downstairs and that her death was the result of an accident. This finding will be recorded in my formal inquisition.

I wish to thank all involved in this inquiry for their considerable co-operation. The clarity of the witnesses' statements has been a great help in my inquiries. I mention that of the British Antarctic Survey Medical Officer, Dr Julie Hunt, in particular. I have already offered my condolences to Mr Williams and his family but repeat them now. I also take this opportunity to thank the people of the Falkland Islands for their kindness and help to Mr Williams while he was in Stanley waiting to return to the UK with his wife's body. He has told me how much he appreciated the care and consideration he was shown as he tried to come to terms with the tragedy.

This inquest is now closed.

Clare Faulds

15th January 2015