



Thursday 25 February 2021

### **Critical drug support needed for prisoners re-entering the community**

The overdose of a man one day after he was released from Port Philip Prison has prompted Victorian Coroner Jacqui Hawkins to recommend the Victorian government overhaul the way it supports people who use drugs when they are imprisoned and when they exit Victoria's prison system.

Shae Paszkiewicz, 40, was found unresponsive in Richmond after a heroin overdose on 7 December 2017. He was taken to St Vincent's Hospital, but sustained severe hypoxic brain injury and died four days later.

In the finding released today, Coroner Hawkins found Mr Paszkiewicz had used drugs since he was a teenager and had served 11 terms of imprisonment for offences related to his drug use.

Australian and international research consistently shows that people who have spent time in prison are at a higher risk of death in the community, with an increased risk of fatal overdose in the weeks and months following release.

In 2017, the year Mr Paszkiewicz died, there were 220 heroin-involved overdose deaths in Victoria. Of these, 90 (40.9%) had spent time in prison at some point and 10, including Mr Paszkiewicz, died within seven days of release from prison.

To understand how to reduce overdose risk in this vulnerable group, Coroner Hawkins consulted with government departments, academic experts, and organisations supporting people who have had contact with the corrections system.

Recurring themes in the submissions included shortcomings in drug treatment programs in prison; inadequate clinical and therapeutic supports for people using drugs when they transition from prison to the community; sub-optimal delivery of Opioid Substitution Therapy both inside and outside prison; and a lack of information about health outcomes among people who have contact with Victoria's prison system.

Her Honour noted that implementing meaningful initiatives to improve health outcomes among people who use drugs and have contact with the prison system, would require many different government departments and other organisations to work together.

As such, Coroner Hawkins recommends that the Victorian Department of Health (VDH) take on formal responsibility for coordinating this work to reverse the tragic toll of deaths following exit from prison.

In addition, Her Honour has recommended:

- VDH convene a formal advisory group to establish policies and programs to reduce drug-related mortality among people who are released from prison.
- VDH, with Corrections Victoria and Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety jointly collate timely information about the health outcomes of all prisoners post-release.
- the immediate introduction of a take-home naloxone program for all people in Victorian prisons who have a history of opioid use and who are preparing to exit prison.

A copy of the finding and full list of recommendations can be accessed here:

[https://www.coronerscourt.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-02/Finding\\_Paskiewicz\\_COR20176235.pdf](https://www.coronerscourt.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-02/Finding_Paskiewicz_COR20176235.pdf)