



IN THE CORONERS COURT
OF VICTORIA
AT MELBOURNE

Court Reference: COR 2022 007113

FINDING INTO DEATH WITHOUT INQUEST

Form 38 Rule 63(2)

Section 67 of the Coroners Act 2008

Findings of:	Sarah Gebert, Coroner
Deceased:	JBV
Date of birth:	1975
Date of death:	12 December 2022
Cause of death:	1(a) Acute alcohol and drug (diazepam, paroxetine) toxicity
Place of death:	Novotel Hotel, 10 Eastern Beach Road, Geelong, Victoria
Key words:	Alcohol and drug addiction, treatment at rehabilitation facility, abscond, alcohol and drug toxicity

INTRODUCTION

1. On 12 December 2022, JBV was 47 years old when she died after ingesting a combination of alcohol and prescribed medication.
2. At the time of her death, JBV lived alone.

THE CORONIAL INVESTIGATION

3. JBV's death was reported to the coroner as it fell within the definition of a reportable death in the *Coroners Act 2008 (the Act)*. Reportable deaths include deaths that are unexpected, unnatural or violent or result from accident or injury.
4. The role of a coroner is to independently investigate reportable deaths to establish, if possible, identity, medical cause of death, and surrounding circumstances. Surrounding circumstances are limited to events which are sufficiently proximate and causally related to the death. The purpose of a coronial investigation is to establish the facts, not to cast blame or determine criminal or civil liability.
5. Under the Act, coroners also have the important functions of helping to prevent deaths and promoting public health and safety and the administration of justice through the making of comments or recommendations in appropriate cases about any matter connected to the death under investigation.
6. Victoria Police assigned Senior Constable Jeremiah Quinn to be the Coroner's Investigator for the investigation of JBV's death. Detective Senior Sergeant Mark Guthrie subsequently conducted additional enquiries on my behalf. As part of their investigation, police took statements from witnesses and submitted a coronial brief of evidence, which was revised on one occasion.
7. This finding draws on the totality of the coronial investigation into JBV's death, including evidence contained in the coronial briefs and documents obtained by the Court. Whilst I have reviewed all the material, I will only refer to that which is directly relevant to my findings or necessary for narrative clarity. In the coronial jurisdiction, facts must be established on the balance of probabilities.¹

¹ Subject to the principles enunciated in *Briginshaw v Briginshaw* (1938) 60 CLR 336. The effect of this and similar authorities is that coroners should not make adverse findings against, or comments about, individuals unless the evidence provides a comfortable level of satisfaction as to those matters taking into account the consequences of such findings or comments.

Background

8. After finishing high school, JBV studied Visual Arts. She later worked as a potter and undertook various other jobs. JBV later met FGV, and they went on to travel around Australia together.
9. JBV subsequently worked as a flight attendant and travelled around the world, which she loved. She also resided for a time in the United Arab Emirates. After returning to live in Australia, JBV commenced studying nursing and married FGV in 2003.
10. JBV continued working as a nurse until her children were born in 2007 and 2009. She and FGV thereafter established their own business selling massage chairs.
11. In 2017, JBV was devastated by the loss of her grandmother, BSV.
12. At about this time, JBV disclosed to her family that she was struggling with alcoholism. In 2019, she attended a month-long rehabilitation at Warrnambool Hospital.
13. In 2020, JBV moved into a unit on her own. According to her aunt, MAV, JBV struggled with being alone and missed her children; she was not doing well.
14. Over the following years, JBV continued to struggle with alcohol use. She attended additional rehabilitation programmes and was supported by MAV and her husband, staying with them on occasion. MAV said, *“I can recount many situations of dealing with [JBV] that put my family in a very stressful place. When she was drinking, she would have brain waves of things to do, and it was very difficult to change her mind and convince her that would not be a good idea. Sometimes she listened and other times she wanted what she wanted. ... With her nursing knowledge she was aware of what each medication was for and how to take it. However, I had to take control of her Mental Health medications as she was at times unable to remember when she had taken certain medication and then taken more. This was usually when she was consuming too much alcohol. She had hidden alcohol in our house that we were not initially aware of.”*
15. Following separation from FGV, JBV began a relationship with her long-term friend, WHL. Toward the end of 2021, JBV went to Canada to visit WHL. She returned to Australia in May 2022 with plans for WHL to visit in November 2022. WHL stated that they had a great time together.

16. Following her marriage breakdown and property settlement with FGV, JBV was looking forward to purchasing her own home and viewed potential houses with MAV.

MATTERS IN RELATION TO WHICH A FINDING MUST, IF POSSIBLE, BE MADE

Circumstances in which the death occurred

17. From 21 October to 18 November 2022, JBV participated in a rehabilitation programme at The Hader Clinic in Geelong for alcohol and drug addiction.
18. On 21 November 2022, WHL arrived in Australia and stayed with JBV at her unit. He stated that when he arrived, it was evident that JBV had started drinking again despite her recently completed rehabilitation. He stated that he tried to get her to stop drinking, but JBV hid the alcohol from him. After several days, JBV contacted The Hader Clinic and asked to return.
19. JBV was re-admitted to The Hader Clinic on 27 November 2022. WHL stayed at JBV's unit and intended to support her once she returned home. In the meantime, they spoke to each other on the phone. WHL stated JBV sounded like she was doing ok but he suspected she was still obtaining alcohol somehow.
20. On 9 December 2022, JBV messaged MAV expressing her excitement about viewing a house on 12 December. JBV also spoke to WHL that evening about going to see the house.
21. On the evening of 10 December 2022, JBV left The Hader Clinic in the company of a co-patient, GRF. They walked to Buckley's Entertainment Venue, which was a five-minute walk from The Hader Clinic, where they both consumed alcohol and played the pokies.
22. The pair thereafter caught a taxi to the Novotel Hotel in Geelong where they booked a room. At some point during their stay at the hotel, GRF attended a bottle shop via a taxi where he purchased two bottles of vodka and a six-pack of bourbon and cola. He subsequently informed police that he had not observed JBV drink the vodka, and he only drank the bourbon.
23. At 8.52pm on the evening of 11 December 2022, Victoria Police were requested to attend the hotel in response to GRF's behaviour. According to Senior Constable Alec Dolby, the hotel manager stated that JBV had requested an ambulance for GRF, and both were very intoxicated. Upon attending their room, Senior Constable Alec Dolby observed numerous bottles of vodka. JBV appeared intoxicated, slurring her speech and was unsteady. However, she was able to walk on her own and converse. Attending ambulance paramedics did not hold any concerns about JBV at the time. Police left the hotel once paramedics also cleared GRF.

The interaction between police and JBV and GRF was captured on Body Worn Camera (BWC) footage and formed part of the evidence before the Court.

24. At 9.15am the following morning, 12 December 2022, hotel staff again contacted emergency services due to GRF's intoxicated behaviour. Police members attended and subsequently found JBV unresponsive in bed. They commenced cardiopulmonary resuscitation whilst awaiting the arrival of paramedics who were unable to revive JBV. Paramedics formally verified JBV's death at 10.15am.
25. Photographs of the hotel room depict more than two vodka bottles in the room.
26. Detective Senior Sergeant Mark Guthrie concluded that JBV had ingested an excessive amount of alcohol and prescribed medications. There was no indication that she had intended to take her own life or that another person was involved in her death.

Identity of the deceased

27. On 14 December 2022, JBV, born in 1975, was visually identified by her partner, WHL.
28. Identity is not in dispute and requires no further investigation.

Medical cause of death

29. Forensic Pathologist, Dr Heinrich Bower, from the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine (VIFM), conducted an autopsy on 16 December 2022 and provided a written report of his findings dated 8 February 2023.
30. The post-mortem examination was consistent with the reported circumstances. No significant natural disease was detected that may have caused or contributed to death. There was no post-mortem evidence of violence or injury contributing to death.
31. Dr Bower noted that post-mortem toxicological analysis revealed a markedly elevated blood and vitreous alcohol concentration at 0.42% and 0.49%. Alcohol at these levels together with diazepam² and paroxetine³ may cause significant central nervous system and respiratory depression, leading to coma and death.

² Diazepam is indicated for anxiety, muscle relaxation and seizures. Nordiazepam, temazepam, and oxazepam are metabolites. Adverse effects of diazepam include confusion, incoordination, physical dependence, sedation, and seizures in withdrawal. Overdose can cause ataxia, drowsiness, and muscular weakness.

³ Paroxetine is indicated for major depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, panic disorder, social phobia, generalised anxiety disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder.

32. Dr Bouwer provided an opinion that the medical cause of death was “*1(a) Acute alcohol and drug (diazepam, paroxetine) toxicity*”.
33. I accept Dr Bouwer’s opinion.

FAMILY CONCERNS

34. In her statement, MAV noted that JBV’s family had not been informed that she had left The Hader Clinic. She stated that this appeared to be in breach of their confidentiality protocol, which stated family or next of kin would be contacted when a patient absconded or did not return from an outing.
35. It appears that The Hader Clinic had contacted FGV and attempts to contact MAV, who was JBV’s listed next of kin, were only made after JBV’s passing. Unfortunately, MAV missed these attempts and when she tried to call back, no one answered her calls.
36. MAV also voiced concern that JBV appeared to have access to her mobile phone outside of the hours allowed in The Hader Clinic’s Visitation Information Sheet, which indicated ‘tech time’ was from 4.30pm to 5.00pm on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and 4.30pm to 5.00pm on Sundays if they had not received a visitor.

The Hader Clinic

37. Detective Senior Sergeant Guthrie stated that Victoria Police had contacted The Hader Clinic on at least five occasions for the purpose of obtaining a statement to assist the coronial investigation. Police did not receive a response to messages or statement.
38. On 19 December 2023, the Court issued a Form 4⁴ to The Hader Clinic requesting a statement addressing the following questions:

Provide an overview of [JBV]’s admissions to the Hader Clinic including but not limited to:

(a) the dates of admission;

(b) an outline of [JBV]’s known medical and mental health history;

⁴ Pursuant to section 42 of the *Coroners Act 2008*, a coroner made require a person to give a document to the coroner or to prepare a statement addressing matters specified by the coroner. Such a request is made via a Form 4.

(c) reasons for her admission;

(d) assessments made and treatment plan, including medications prescribed;

(e) [JBV]'s progress during her admission(s); and

(f) any other information that may be relevant to the coronial investigation.

39. On 7 April 2024, the Court received an email from Jakline Barkho, Family/Program/Crisis Coordinator at The Hader Clinic, which was well outside of the 40-day response period. She provided the following information:

I, Jakline Barkho, the Family/Program/Crisis Coordinator at The Hader Clinic, am submitting this detailed statement concerning the treatment of [JBV], who was admitted to Hader Private Geelong on Friday 18th of November 2022. [JBV] had undergone 22 nights in treatment before absconding from our service with another client on Saturday 10th of December 2022. During [JBV]'s time in treatment, the position I held was Program Manager.

In accordance with your requirements, I will outline the sequence of treatment, referencing the dates of consultations, tests ordered, results of those tests, advice provided, and any referrals to other health service providers. Please note that my summary of care is based on information extracted from [JBV]'s medical records.

Access to the deceased person's medical record has been crucial in providing an accurate account of events. Any discrepancies between the medical record and my recollection will be duly noted in this statement.

I have attached [JBV]'s complete medical file containing her medical records and psychosocial case notes for your perusal. This documentation will provide a comprehensive overview of her treatment history at our facility.

Furthermore, I will ensure that any specific questions outlined in your request are addressed in this statement. Relevant policies and protocols applicable at the time of [JBV]'s treatment will be referenced, with copies of these policies attached for your reference.

Given the elapsed time since [JBV]'s departure from our care, I will refrain from assuming events based solely on past policies and protocols. Any medical terminology

or abbreviations used in this statement will be explained upon first mention to ensure clarity for all parties involved.

I am committed to cooperating fully with your investigation and am available for any further inquiries or clarifications you may require.

40. Despite Ms Barkho stating she would provide JBV's treatment history and answer the questions posed, no statement was received. Nor were any relevant policies and protocols. Upon the Court questioning whether an attachment was missing from Ms Barkho's email, Ms Barkho confirmed that her statement was in the body of the email (as extracted above).
41. The Court then reiterated to Ms Barkho that a *statement* was required addressing the specific questions set out in the Form 4 and that it did not appear Ms Barkho's email addressed JBV's period of treatment at The Hader Clinic. By return email on 24 May 2024, Ms Barkho stated:

Thank you for your email. My first report was not found to be sufficient. Therefore, I requested for the contracted GP Dr Sharon Hoch to complete the report, Dr Hoch had advised that she would complete the report and at the time had Covid and requested for an extension.

Dr Hoch recently resigned as a contractor within the business.

42. A contact number for Dr Hoch was provided. I note from the records (see further below) that Dr Sharon Hoch was only one of JBV's multiple treating practitioners at the clinic and not the most recent. It is unclear why another practitioner could not prepare a statement to assist the coronial investigation.
43. Detective Senior Sergeant Guthrie also contacted Ms Barkho on 28 July 2025, who stated she would complete a statement. However, no statement was subsequently received.

The Hader Clinic records

44. As part of my investigation, I obtained JBV's records from The Hader Clinic.
45. Records from JBV's first admission to The Hader Clinic from 21 October 2022 indicate JBV's substance use history included cannabis and acid. Her alcohol use was noted to be a cask of wine per day, having started drinking at 14 years of age. JBV's history also included historical and recent sexual abuse/assault, previous and recent suicide attempts, depression, anxiety, and mood disorder. She had had multiple admissions to other rehabilitation facilities. A plan was

made to assist JBV with withdrawal, which included medication as required, nursing care, group sessions, access to a general practitioner, psychologist, psychiatrist, and Alcohol and Other Drug workers.

46. Toward the end of her first admission, records were largely consistent in describing JBV as settled, engaging well, and participating in group activities. JBV was discharged at 11.00am on 18 November 2022.
47. JBV re-presented to The Hader Clinic at about 10.00am on 27 November 2022.
48. On 28 November 2022, JBV was reviewed by Dr Mike Masih who noted that she had completed the previous rehabilitation programme on 18 November 2022 and she had re-presented for detox and/or rehabilitation with a planned stay of 28 nights. JBV's previous substance use was noted to be four bottles of wine per day with her last substance use the day prior. A similar treatment plan to her previous admission was developed.
49. JBV was also reviewed by Dr Keflemariam Yohannes (psychologist), who noted that JBV was distressed about her recent relapse. JBV had reportedly felt well until WHL had arrived; he had brought alcohol with him. JBV was reminded that relapse was part of the stages of change.
50. During this second admission, records again described JBV as settled and engaging in group activities. However, on 3 December 2022, she appeared agitated and expressed a desire to be discharged. Following a counselling session, JBV appears to have agreed to stay but remained "surly" and "dismissive".
51. On 5 December 2022, JBV was reviewed by Dr Bernard Hickey (psychiatrist), who noted that JBV was willing to engage in counselling and further treatment.
52. At about 9.15pm on 10 December 2022, staff could not find JBV for the medication round. A letter was found on her bed stating, "I am sorry, but I'm safe". A record entry notes, "Notified family by Recovery coach ..." without further detail regarding who was contacted and when.

Conclusion

53. The available information in the medical notes about JBV's care appears to indicate she was making some progress in her last admission before she absconded. She was generally noted to be settled and engaging in activities.

54. The 'Confidentiality at The Hader Clinic' procedure dated 16 November 2017 provided by MAV noted that staff would inform family if the client left treatment.
55. In the absence of any further information being provided by The Hader Clinic, despite numerous requests being made by police and the Court, it appears that staff did not contact JBV's nominated contact person following her absconding on 10 December 2022.
56. This lack of contact has caused great distress to JBV's family, in addition to her subsequent passing. However, I am unable to say that earlier contact with JBV's family would have changed the ultimate outcome.
57. The Hader Clinic was notified of my proposed comments and invited to provide a response. On 12 February 2026, Jo Tyson, Quality and Safety officer, indicated she did not wish to provide any further information.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

58. Pursuant to section 67(1) of the Act I make the following findings:
 - (a) the identity of the deceased was JBV, born in 1975;
 - (b) the death occurred on 12 December 2022 at Novotel Hotel, 10 Eastern Beach Road, Geelong, Victoria, from acute alcohol and drug (diazepam, paroxetine) toxicity; and
 - (c) the death occurred in the circumstances described above.
59. Having considered all of the circumstances, I am satisfied that JBV's death was the unintended consequence of the alcohol and prescribed drugs she consumed.
60. Pursuant to section 73(1A) of the Act, I order that this finding be published on the Coroners Court of Victoria website in accordance with the rules.

I convey my sincere condolences to JBV's family for their loss.

I direct that a copy of this finding be provided to the following:

Senior Next of Kin

MAV

Barwon Health

The Hader Clinic

Senior Sergeant Anthony Creanour

Detective Senior Sergeant Mark Guthrie, Victoria Police, Coronial Investigator

Senior Constable Jeremiah Quinn, Victoria Police, Coronial Investigator

Signature:



Coroner Sarah Gebert

Date: 16 March 2026



NOTE: Under section 83 of the *Coroners Act 2008* ('the Act'), a person with sufficient interest in an investigation may appeal to the Trial Division of the Supreme Court against the findings of a coroner in respect of a death after an investigation. An appeal must be made within 6 months after the day on which the determination is made, unless the Supreme Court grants leave to appeal out of time under section 86 of the Act.
