



IN THE CORONERS COURT
OF VICTORIA
AT MELBOURNE

COR 2023 005498

FINDING INTO DEATH WITHOUT INQUEST

Form 38 Rule 63(2)

Section 67 of the Coroners Act 2008

Findings of:	Coroner Paul Lawrie
Deceased:	Henry Eli Bennett
Date of birth:	29 September 1987
Date of death:	Between 2 July 2021 and 8 July 2021
Cause of death:	Unascertained
Place of death:	In the vicinity of Goongerah, Victoria 3888
Keywords:	Missing person; bushland search, suspected exposure

INTRODUCTION

1. On 2 July 2021, Henry Eli Bennett was 33 years old when he disappeared from his home in Goongerah¹, Victoria.
2. Mr Bennett is survived by his parents, Andrew and Christina, and his three siblings.

Background

3. Mr Bennett was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and schizophrenia. He also suffered from type 2 diabetes for which he was prescribed metformin at a dose of 1,000mg twice daily.
4. For his mental health, Mr Bennett was supported by Latrobe Regional Health, including the Community Mental Health Service. His treatment primarily comprised of long-acting injectable antipsychotics (which Mr Bennett did not like and frequently missed) and clonazepam for the treatment of anxiety.
5. Mr Bennett moved out of home for a period at the age of 19 and lived independently, though by the time of his disappearance he had returned home to live with his parents. He was socially isolated and found it difficult to make friends.
6. According to his mother, Mr Bennett's mental health declined as he got older. He found walking to be soothing and he used it as a coping mechanism. He enjoyed taking long walks, but it appeared that he generally remained in sight of the house. He was not a confident navigator and struggled with directions in areas where he was not familiar. He often chose inappropriate clothing for the weather conditions. He had described these walks to his clinicians as going on "adventures".
7. Mr Bennett had been reported missing to police on six occasions in the three years prior to his disappearance. He was often located by members of the public, police or paramedics in a dishevelled state, sometimes naked. Most recently, on 1 March 2021, Mr Bennett was located naked and exhausted in the middle of the Snowy River, after having been missing for three days. He was subsequently taken to Bairnsdale Hospital for psychiatric care.
8. Mr Bennett was last reviewed by his Community Mental Health Service clinician on 21 June 2021, who noted that Mr Bennett was the most relaxed they had seen him. Mr Bennett was apparently working on writing a book, working on his artwork and was enjoying music and

¹ Approximately 50 kilometers north of Orbost, in eastern Victoria.

walking. The clinician recorded that there was no apparent risk of self-harm or harm to others, and no evident psychotic phenomena.

THE CORONIAL INVESTIGATION

9. Mr Bennett's presumed death was reported to the coroner on 3 October 2025, 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. Section 3 of the Act provides that death includes suspected death.
10. 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.
11. 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.
12. First Constable Hannah Carew acted as the Coronal Investigator for the investigation of Mr Bennett's death. First Constable Carew conducted inquiries on my behalf and compiled a coronial brief of evidence.
13. This finding draws on the totality of the coronial investigation into the death of Henry Eli Bennett including the evidence contained in the coronial brief. 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.²
14. The coronial investigation of a suspected death differs significantly from most other coronial investigations which commence with the discovery of a deceased person's body or remains. The focus in those cases is on identification of the body or remains, a forensic pathologist's

² 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.

examination and advice to the coroner about the medical cause of death and, where possible, the circumstances in which the death occurred.

15. Absent a body or remains, the coronial investigation focuses on the last sighting of the person suspected to be deceased; any subsequent contact with family, friends or authorities; and any evidence of proof of life since the last sighting. In such cases, the coronial investigation must first endeavour to establish, on the balance of probabilities, whether the person suspected to be deceased – is deceased. Such proof of death often relies on the absence of evidence that the person is alive, such as physical searches for the person; a lack of contact with known friends, family or colleagues; a lack of banking or similar activities; and the lack of an “electronic footprint” that is usually evident with innumerable modern everyday activities. It also relies on other circumstantial evidence such as the prevailing environmental conditions and the individual attributes of the person suspected to be deceased, including their state of health.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF DISAPPEARANCE

16. At approximately 7.00am on 2 July 2021, Mr Bennett’s parents left home to drive to Orbost for the day. Mr Bennett was at home when they departed, and he did not mention any plans to leave the property.
17. At approximately 11.00am, Mr Bennett sent his mother a text message saying he had put the mail on the table, as she had asked him to do before she left.
18. Mr Bennett had left home by the time his parents returned at around 4:30pm. They assumed he had gone for a walk and that he would return home within 24 hours, as he usually did.
19. Mr Bennett’s parents reported him missing to police on the morning of 3 July 2021, after he failed to return home.
20. It is believed that Mr Bennett was wearing shorts, a T-shirt and Crocs shoes. He did not take with him any medication and it was noted that he had last taken his medication on 2 July 2021. He was believed to have his iPad and iPhone with him, though due to his paranoia he had location services turned off on both devices.

INVESTIGATION INTO DISAPPEARANCE

Initial search

21. Mr Bennett's last known location was his home at 19 Aberdeen Road, Goongerah (**the property**). His home is part of a 300-acre property in a narrow valley with Errinundra National Park to the east and State Forest to the west. The property is approximately 300 metres above sea level, while the surrounding area is characterised by thick forest, close steep valleys and gullies, and many ridges and hills rising above 800 metres elevation. The area is truly remote, and Goongerah itself is a very small township of only a few dozen people.
22. On 3 July 2021, Victoria Police conducted an initial search of Mr Bennett's property and an address in Orbost owned by his family. Mr Bennett was unable to be located, and there was nothing at either address to suggest any suspicious circumstances. Police doorknocked in the local area, but no sightings of Mr Bennett were reported. Victoria Police Airwing also conducted a search around the property.
23. On 4 July 2021 an extensive land and air search began. Over seventy people took part in the search. The Victoria Police contingent comprised general duties members and specialist units such as the Dog Squad, Air Wing, Search and Rescue, and Mounted Branch. Other agencies involved included the State Emergency Service, the then Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning,³ Forest Fire Management, and local residents.
24. On 5 July 2021, Dr Paul Luckin, an expert in determining both the "Time Frame for Survivability" and "Time Frame for Mobility" provided his advice to police. He considered that if Mr Bennett would not drink water if he found it, he would by then be immobile and would likely survive only until the end of Tuesday, 6 July 2021.
25. Dr Luckin also considered the lack of Mr Bennett's diabetes medication which would cause an increase in blood sugar level. However, as Mr Bennett would be expending energy with little or no food, the increase was likely to be small. Ultimately, Dr Luckin concluded that Mr Bennett's diabetes was not likely to limit his survival.
26. On 7 July 2021, shoe prints were located 250 to 300 metres south of Mr Bennett's home. These were followed back to the Bonang Road, and the area was line searched but nothing

³ Now the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

further was found. It was suspected that the shoe prints belonged to Mr Bennett as he was known to walk in that same location.

27. Also on 7 July 2021, searchers located strands of hair on a powerline easement approximately 280 metres from Mr Bennett's home. After discussions with scientists from the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine, it was determined that there would be little value in testing the hair.
28. By Friday, 9 July 2021, Dr Luckin considered there was no reasonable prospect that Mr Bennett had survived in the open. Overnight low temperatures between 2 July and 9 July 2021 ranged between -1°C and 6°C .
29. Accordingly, after seven days of intensive searching and with nothing further identified, the large-scale search was wound down at midday on 9 July 2021. Search activities had covered approximately 25 square kilometres of bush land around Mr Bennett's home and approximately 155 kilometres of roads and tracks surrounding the Goongerah township.

2023 search

30. On 12 and 13 April 2023, police from the New South Wales Police Cadaver Dog Unit were enlisted to conduct a cold case search for Mr Bennett in the Goongerah area. An extensive search was conducted with the assistance of the specialist cadaver dogs, but no further evidence was uncovered.

Proof of life checks

31. Victoria Police conducted several "proof of life" checks, which identified the following matters:
 - (a) the last access to Mr Bennett's bank accounts was online on 1 July 2021;
 - (b) Mr Bennett has had no recorded contact with Centrelink since July 2021; and
 - (c) inquiries with interstate police, hospitals and family members have revealed no suggestion of any contact or sighting of Mr Bennett since 2 July 2021.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

32. Having considered the available evidence and, in particular the following matters, I am satisfied that Mr Bennett is deceased –
- (a) Mr Bennett’s history of walking and becoming lost or disorientated.
 - (b) The hazardous environment in which Mr Bennett went missing, which is characterised by steep rugged terrain and dense bush.
 - (c) Mr Bennett’s habit of wearing clothing that was inadequate for the conditions and the likelihood that he was not wearing suitable clothing on this occasion.
 - (d) The low prevailing temperatures and, in particular, the very low overnight temperatures.
 - (e) The absence of any sign to suggest Mr Bennett may have survived beyond the period of the search in July 2021.
33. The available evidence does not enable me to make a finding as to the precise circumstances or cause of Mr Bennett’s death. I note however the likelihood that he met with an accident after leaving his home on 2 July 2021 or became disorientated and succumbed to exposure to the elements. I am satisfied that there are no suspicious circumstances or signs of any third-party involvement in his disappearance.
34. Pursuant to section 67(1) of the *Coroners Act 2008* I make the following findings:
- (a) the identity of the deceased was Henry Eli Bennett, born 29 September 1987;
 - (b) the death was due to unascertained causes;
 - (c) the death occurred between 2 July 2021 and 8 July 2021, in or near Goongerah, Victoria; and
 - (d) the death occurred in the circumstances described above.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge the efforts of all emergency services personnel and local community members involved in the search for Mr Bennett, who remained dedicated to their task in extremely challenging conditions.

I convey my sincere condolences to Mr Bennett's family and friends for their loss.

DIRECTIONS

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.

Pursuant to section 49(2) of the Act, I direct the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages to record Henry Eli Bennett deceased, with the medical cause of death as "1(a) Unascertained".

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

Andrew Bennett and Christina Brown, Senior Next of Kin

Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages

Constable Hannah Carew, Coronial Investigator

Signature:



CORONER PAUL LAWRIE



Date: 16 June 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.
