

Coroner's Office criticised for 'blunt' handling of informing families that specimens may have been collected from loved ones



By Adam Holmes

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Medical Ethics

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The names were published in The Mercury, and the Examiner, on Saturday. (ABC News: Jordy Gregg)

In short:

Tasmania's Coroner's Office is investigating whether specimens collected from coronial autopsies were taken and held in a museum without the knowledge or consent of families.

As part of the investigation, the Coroner's Office published the names of 126 people in a public notice in the Hobart Mercury and Launceston Examiner on Saturday, and asked for relatives to contact the office.

What's next?

Independent MLC Meg Webb is calling for a trauma-informed approach to releasing sensitive information that may cause distress to families.

Tony Santi died in a motorbike crash near Collinsvale in Hobart in 1976, aged 19.

It was a traumatic time for his family.

"You learn to live with the grief rather than move on," his brother John Santi told ABC Radio Hobart.

It's a grief his family has lived with for almost half a century, visiting his gravesite each Christmas.

But on Saturday, they discovered something previously unknown about Tony.



Tony Santi died in an accident. (Supplied: John Santi)

A pathology museum at the University of Tasmania may have been holding a specimen taken during his autopsy — and kept it in its collection — without the knowledge and consent of Tony's family.

Tony's name, date of birth, date of death and last-known address were [among more than 120 listed by the Coroner's Office](#) in a public notice published in the Mercury and Examiner newspapers.

According to the notice, which is also published on the [Magistrates Court's Coronial Division website](#), the cases listed have been referred to the coroner for investigation.



The R. A. Rodda Pathology Museum is part of the University of Tasmania's School of Medicine. (Supplied: UTAS)

John Santi said that suddenly seeing his brother's name published without warning was "very traumatic and distressing".

"To think that you've buried your loved one, but there's still a part of him here," Mr Santi said.

"I'm glad that my mum and dad have passed so they never had to see this sort of thing."

Mr Santi said he contacted the Coroner's Office, but was not told what type of specimen had been retained from Tony's body.

He was instead given a form to fill out.

The R. A. Rodda Museum told the Coroner's Office in 2016 that it may have in its collection specimens possibly retained following coronial autopsies in the past, and that they may have been collected without the knowledge or consent of families.

If you or anyone you know needs help:

- [Lifeline](#) on 13 11 14
 - Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander crisis support line [13YARN](#) on 13 92 76
 - [Beyond Blue](#) on 1300 224 636
 - [Headspace](#) on 1800 650 890
 - [ReachOut](#) at au.reachout.com
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"The existence of these specimens has since been confirmed and formally reported under the provisions of the Coroners Act 1995," the public notice reads.

Coronial autopsies are carried out as part of coronial investigations, which include investigations of unexpected deaths and deaths that occur in custody or care.



The R.A. Rodda Pathology Museum was established in 1966. (Supplied: UTAS)

Relatives not offered ways to access support

The 126 people listed died between 1966 and 1984, and included people who died in vehicle crashes.

There were also people who died in a bushfire, and by suicide.

Some of those listed were as young as three years old.

The Royal Derwent Hospital and Lachlan Park Hospital — both former mental health hospitals in New Norfolk, referred to as "asylums" at the time — are listed as the last known address for 16 of the people.

The advertisement did not include any support phone numbers.

Independent Nelson MLC Meg Webb said the notice could have been delivered more "sensitively" and in a way that offered support for those affected.

"There may have been people who could have been directly contacted ... and that done in a more private setting, so that it wasn't reading it in the paper," Ms Webb said.

"I accept though, because this is an extended period of time ... there may have been cases that they weren't able to identify a direct contact, and therefore a more broad and public reach-out may have been necessary.

"But that doesn't mean we just do it in a blunt way, without thinking about how to support the people that we are in fact trying to engage with."



Meg Webb says the information should have been released more "sensitively", and in a way that offered support for affected families. (ABC News: Luke Bowden)

Ms Webb said she had asked the Coroner's Office to make available a list of support services for those who may be distressed by the notice, and that she intended to contact the attorney-general, Guy Barnett.

"If we anticipate that [a notice] could cause distress, then there has to be alongside that a plan for how we best ameliorate the distress and best provide support or services to those who might be affected by it," she said.

"Trauma-informed approaches should be standard now."

The Coroner's Office did not comment on the criticism, saying:

"As these matters have been formally reported we cannot provide any further information whilst they are under investigation."

However, [the webpage](#) was updated on Friday morning — after Ms Webb's concerns were raised — to include the form families are asked to submit to provide information, details of support services and information sheets to help people cope with grief and loss.

Information was also added about how to receive assistance from the coronial liaison officer, whose role includes helping people understand the role of the coroner and to support next of kin through coronial processes.

Investigation continuing

Established in 1966, the R.A. Rodda Museum of Pathology is a teaching and research museum in the university's medical school.

It has about 2,700 items in its collection representing every organ system of the body, according to information on its website.

Tours of the museum are only available to medical and health professionals, and medical, paramedical and health science students.

In April last year, the Coroner's Office opened an investigation into the specimens and how they were collected. The investigation continues.

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