

## Talking Point

The hot topics that have Tasmanians talking  
Have your say, email [talkingpoints@themercury.com.au](mailto:talkingpoints@themercury.com.au)

# Families hurt and shocked by this lapse

Imagine finding out in a newspaper ad about a loved one's remains, writes **Meg Webb**

**I**wish I didn't need to write this. But in the past week I've been contacted by too many families distressed by the handling of the coronial project inquiry into the R.A. Rodda Museum of Pathology's historic collection of autopsy samples.

Their shocking stories demand broader acknowledgment and action.

The state government must provide an immediate public apology to all Tasmanians who discovered – courtesy of newspaper advertisements published on January 25 – that this so-called collection includes a close deceased family member.

Can you imagine the gut-wrenching horror of hearing from a friend that the name of your deceased mother or father, child, sister, or brother, was published in a newspaper advertisement because some part of their bodily remains were kept in a museum collection



Independent  
MLC for  
Nelson  
Meg Webb

members must be consulted on appropriate options regarding the fate of their relative's partial remains. This decision cannot be made for them.

Some may hold religious beliefs requiring any remains are either interred with the deceased or buried separately in a faith-based ceremony.

I can attest to the additional and unnecessary trauma and stress these concerns are causing people.

The authorities were notified of this matter in 2016.

for decades without your knowledge? And possibly without their permission.

That was how such distressing news was broken to too many Tasmanians last week.

Apparently, a coronial division staffer spent months scouring births, deaths and marriages records to identify senior next of kin.

However, I've been informed of one instance where current descendants are living in the home of their deceased relative, the address of which was published in the weekend advertisement.

Yet, the first they knew their family member was on the list, was upon publication.

Others tell me there are very few, if any, families which share their rare surnames, and cannot believe they could not be identified and contacted.

Those affected understand why an inquiry is necessary.

But they do not understand why they were not contacted personally and privately instead of being confronted by a list of names in the papers.

What exact steps were taken to track them down prior the decision to publish their relative's name?

For some the shock and pain is exacerbated by the expectation they have the digital skills and means to download forms, type in personal details of their loved one(s), scan and upload electronic proof of identity documents.

This assumption is unfair, highly bureaucratic and not trauma-informed.

Crucially, current family

Since then, we should have seen an investment in a trauma-informed approach emphasising, wherever possible, personal and private notification, ongoing practical and emotional support when engaging with the coronial project inquiry, and clear consultation on any decisions required.

Yes, there are standard procedures spelled out in the Coroners Act 1995 and other guidelines. But surely it was recognised that this particular matter is highly unusual and deeply sensitive?

Default processes and blanket public communication processes were never going to be a good fit.

Extra effort, thought, and yes, dedicated resources should have been factored in from the start – eight years ago.

A trauma informed approach means to proactively try to imagine someone else's pain.

It means effort is made to anticipate potential triggers to avoid the risk of re-harming those already hurt.

It requires placing the affected persons in the centre of the decision-making process, not leaving them as a passive recipient of fait accompli conclusions.

We must do better when seeking to resolve this awful historic situation.

An immediate and unequivocal apology by the government for current harm inflicted would be a welcome start.

**Meg Webb is the independent member for Nelson**