

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT – CORONIAL PROJECT

Response by Meg Webb MLC

Legislative Council, Parliament of Tasmania
Thursday, 11 December 2025

Please Check Against Delivery

Mr President,

I rise to respond to the Ministerial Statement delivered by the Leader.

As mentioned by the Leader for Government, this Statement is in response to the Coronial Project and the Coroner's Findings report, released on the 8th of September this year.

At the outset, Mr President, I note that the Coroner's Report on this matter has not been tabled in this Parliament.

Given it is very salient to this current debate, I now seek leave to table the *Coronial Project Coroner's Findings: Record of Investigation into Deaths (Without Inquest)* dated the 8th of September 2025.

[table report]

I thank Honourable Members as ensuring this document remains part of a clear public record is paramount. Particularly since, as I recently discovered, the previously available dedicated Coronial Project webpage on the Coroner's website appears to have been taken down.

Which makes tracking down the Findings Report rather difficult for those affected or interested.

Mr President, imagine waking up one morning, sitting down to eat your breakfast while reading the local newspaper, turning the page and then discovering in an advert a loved one's name listed as having some part of their body retained in a museum collection.

Or, possibly, even worse, sitting down to a Sunday lunch with family, to take a phone call from a family friend who informs you that they have seen your dead sister's name in such a list.

A dead sister who died in awful and traumatic circumstances decades ago when you were both young teenagers or twenty year olds.

That nightmare was the waking experience of many Tasmanians following the publication of a full page advert in the *Saturday Mercury* of the 25th of January this year, printed on page five.

For Members who may have missed it, that advert detailed the names of 126 deceased persons, their date of birth or age at the time of their death, the date of their death, and their last known residential address.

It is important to note that the 126 names listed were of a greater total of 177 human specimens which were handed to the University of Tasmania without consent, and which the Coroner's Office were then informed of in 2016.

The purpose of the advert was to call for anyone related to those individuals to contact the Coroner's Office to assist with that Office's inquiries.

Mr President, that January advert, contained distressing details including the fact that some of the deceased were children and infants.

That, and the fact we know that autopsies only tend to be undertaken in the instances of suspicious, or sudden and unexplained deaths, makes this abrupt and public notification without any apparent trauma-informed warnings or support provisions all the more distressing and shocking.

I am on the public record raising those concerns so will not belabour them now.

However, for the purposes of this Ministerial Statement update and the promised forthcoming formal State Apology, it is important that we note and acknowledge not just the distressing nature of the information but also the manner in which that distressing information was communicated.

Mr President, I am sure other Members in this place have heard from constituents those families' harrowing experience following the discovery that a loved one has body parts removed without consent, and which were potentially placed on public display at the R.A. Rodda Museum of Pathology.

Time prevents me from detailing the many, many stories I have heard.

People trying to cope with the discovery their parent had been treated in this appalling and unacceptable manner.

Parent's discovering their young children, and in at least one case, infant, had not been buried whole.

And being forced to grieve all over again.

Utterly heartbreaking, Mr President.

And also, the siblings.

Some of whom had to struggle with deeply personal moral questions regarding whether they should or should not inform their elderly parents or parent.

Members may have heard of the situation of Mr John Santi, who has had the strength to speak publicly about the discovery his elder brother Anthony, or Tony as he went by, was part of this Coronial Project.

Tony had dies of a motorcycle accident when he as 19 years old in 1976.

For those not familiar with Mr John Santi's recent statements on this matter, it is worth drawing Members' attention to a SBS interview given by Mr Santi, and I quote:

"After 50 years, I had to rebury his body part ...

We went and laid that to rest with him.

That's something we should never have had to do...

One of the hardest parts is having to rebury him ... he's been buried twice."

Despite Santi not being a very common surname in Tasmania, John and his family discovered Tony's name on the published January advert.

To say they were outraged and distressed is an understatement, and I do not think John would mind me saying so.

For 50 years John had been going to tend his brother's grave, to then discover Tony had not been interred completely, due to this indignity being inflicted – at some stage, by someone in authority.

Someone who should have known better.

It was unlawful at the time, Mr President, as it is now, for a coroner or anyone else to remove or retain any part of a dead body for any purpose other than investigating the manner and cause of death of that person.

However, John was one of the few 'lucky' ones – and I use that word advisedly, Mr President, in that he did succeed in obtaining Tony's remains at the conclusion of the Coroners' inquiry, so that he could inter those remains into Tony's grave.

Yet, there were still more shocks to come.

Despite being told the samples were small in scope, possibly even just a blood sample, when Tony opened the box delivered to the cemetery to double check the remains had not been cremated in accordance with the family's objections to cremation, he was shocked and horrified to discover he was holding almost the entire brain of his brother, Tony.

It's no surprise that this results in more questions, and increased sense of betrayal, Mr President.

Let alone, for those many families who requested the return of their loved one's remains, but were denied by the Coroner's Office.

We cannot lose sight of the fact, Mr President, that these 177 'specimens' as the accepted coronial language describes them, were taken and retained without consent.

Then to add insult to injury, people were subsequently denied consent to reclaim and repatriate in an appropriate manner their family member's remains.

Is that degree of cruelty the best we can do, Mr President?

Is that the best our formal systems and arms of the state has to offer?

Coroner's Findings September 2025

Mr President, in the context of this ministerial statement, it is important to consider the formal Coroner's Findings Report dated the 8th of September 2025.

Clause 8 states, and I quote:

"There was no jurisdiction for a coroner to authorise removal or retention of any part of a dead body for any purpose other than investigating the manner and cause of death of that person"

Followed by this in Clause 9, and I quote:

"I think it is reasonable to state that the expectation of families is (and would have been) that the body of their loved one is complete.

The fact parts had been retained without knowledge or approval would come as a surprise to many, indeed most, members of the community"

And Clause 10, and I quote:

"Body parts sourced or retained from the post mortem examination cannot be used for medical research or education, at least not without the knowledge and consent of relevant family members."

And lastly, I'll quote:

"The retention of human remains without family or coronial approval, or even knowledge, is an historic practice out of keeping with, and offensive to, contemporary standards and values.

It is inconceivable to my mind that it would ever happen again although the fact that the practice continued for as long as it did and ended only comparatively recently is also almost equally inconceivable."

Mr President, shockingly, the inconceivable did occur, and it has left real damage in its wake.

Further, as I stated in correspondence to the Attorney-General on the 12th of September this year, that inconceivable action was undertaken by state appointees and employees presumably within state and public institutions.

Grief is not only Historic but Current

Mr President, it is only a matter of respect for the parliament to also acknowledge that the pain and grief inflicted is not purely historic.

While recognising the Coroner's Findings report emphasises these abhorrent practices are historic, having ceased in the 1990s, that does not diminish the fact that the hurt, trauma and anger caused to living family members by recent revelations is very current and deeply felt.

For many, as I've already touched upon, the experiences since January this year have added an additional layer of grief and anger.

That must also be addressed and acknowledged.

And there are the further distressing instances where people discovered their family member was involved after the Coroner's Findings report was released in September this year, and further that their loved one's body part had already been destroyed under the burial warrants issued by the Coroner pursuant to the Act.

It is in that spirit of transparency that I need to emphasise my deep disquiet not only of the unauthorised and I believe illegal actions which occurred between 1966 and 1991, but of the systemic failures of how our systems responded to and dealt with affected family members now.

I do not wish to take away from the diligent, empathetic and care taken by individuals going about their jobs throughout this process since the 2016 notification.

However, the system was flawed, for whatever reason, and that must be addressed.

Local Tasmanians who should have been identifiable via authorised searches, were not.

There were grave issues surrounding processes for recognising appropriate next of kin, or even recognising that in some unforeseen circumstances such as this, we need more flexibility in order to recognise more than one individual next of kin, for example.

There did not appear to be sufficient recognition that some current family members may be very elderly now, particularly if their loved one died in 1966.

Expecting them to navigate online and digital ID requirements, forms and communications was extremely problematic.

The protracted nature of the investigation – understandable given the number of illegally retained body parts – but lack of forthcoming information or updates was extremely difficult for affected families.

Many just found the whole system bewildering and alien, and had no idea what to expect or where to go to get assistance in understanding what was happening and why it had to happen the way it was.

And that was largely the extent of my office's involvement in this matter.

Trying to find out and explain what the administrative processes were, assist in filling out and forwarding the necessary online forms, and ask about options available for families who may wish to reclaim their loved one's body parts.

In at least one instance it was arranged and agreed with the Coroner's Office - who wished to have only one point of contact for each specimen under investigation – that my office would be that designated contact point for a particular family.

So, imagine my surprise when I received formal correspondence from the Coroner's Office instructing me to cease advocating for affected people on this matter.

This was at the time we were helping family members argue their case why cremation of their loved one's remains went against their religious beliefs, and they were seeking alternative options.

Clearly, this was not an aspect of any formal judicial investigation – it concerned the aftermath of such formal proceedings.

I have a very healthy respect for the separation of powers, and carefully double-checked those potential ramifications before making any public statement or undertake any enquiry.

So, to be told to stop asking procedural questions on behalf of my constituents was very surprising and disturbing Mr President.

But more importantly it added yet another layer of confusion and betrayal by authorities for the family involved.

Additionally, I have heard of many instances where communication channels have failed resulting in people thinking they had articulated their wishes to reclaim their loved one's body part, only to find out after it had been cremated that request had been delivered to the wrong person, or had not been made through the required channels.

These people where in shock and traumatised, Mr President.

Why was it their responsibility to understand how the system worked?

Why is it that my office is still fielding calls, months after the September Findings Report, from people who are only now discovering their family member was on that list of illegal specimens, and are seeking answers regarding what happened, where is their loved one's remains now, and are they able to reclaim them to inter into their loved one's grave?

Particularly in one recent instance where the individual had been referred to my office by the Coroner's Office.

Despite my office previously being told to desist advocating on people's behalf by that same office.

Hence, I raise these examples, Mr President, as it was not just the actions of 1966 through to 1991 which harmed and distressed so many people, but unfortunately our current systems, those responsible arms of the State, also inflicted additional confusion, and despair.

Which should have been avoidable.

Therefore, those very recent and systemic failings and ramifications must also be part of the focus of this ministerial statement and subsequent formal State Apology to be delivered in this parliament.

Answers still Needed

Mr President, as Honourable Members go about their business in this place, and as I also have done, we question that which doesn't make sense, and we call for accountability.

- We want to know as part of our due diligence, where does the responsibility lie?
- Who is responsible for decision-making? Who is responsible for implementation?
- On what bases are decisions made?
- Where is the oversight, the accountability?
- Basically, where does the buck stop should things go wrong?

We ask those questions, virtually on a daily basis, Mr President, on matters of government policy.

And we know how frustrating it is when we don't get the clear, direct and informative answers to those questions.

How frustrated we feel in the face of apparent dissembling, obfuscation and stone-walling.

Imagine then what it must be like to face such dissembling, obfuscation and stone-walling when seeking to comprehend the awful discovery that part of your child, or sibling, spouse, parent had not been buried along with the rest of them.

But, instead, had been retained and kept illegally, and in some cases placed on public display at the Rodda Museum.

To be honest, Mr President, I really cannot imagine the full breadth of how that feels.

I think the harsh reality is that it is a uniquely devastating and lonely path to travel for those who woke up one morning to discover it stretching out from beneath their feet.

Quiet devastation remains devastation none-the-less.

And in this shocking saga, that devastation has been wrecked by the State in one form or another.

So, it is right and proper for the State to accept responsibility for this devastating period during which position was abused spanning decades, and which will ultimately take the form of a formal parliamentary apology sometime during the first half of next year.

However, the other crucial responsibility the State must deliver on is getting to the absolute bottom of this appalling situation, completely. Transparently. And Accountably.

Crucially, Mr President, responsibility is not solely about finding out what happened at the time, which as we now know, spanned the period from 1966 to 1991.

It is also about taking responsibility for what did or did not occur subsequent to that period, and what is happening now.

Basically, if body samples had been retained from living patients and placed on display without their knowledge and consent, at the very least that would be considered serious malpractice.

Decades of malpractice undertaken by state employees.

It cannot be surprising then, that bereaved family members want complete answers.

- Where the Coroner's Findings of the 8th of September this year remain silent, the government is going to have to step in and fill those gaps.
- Which laws, regulations or employment codes of conduct were broken?
- Was the Tasmanian government of the time made aware of the 2001 findings of the NSW Walker Inquiry which raised concerns regarding retention of organs at autopsy?

If so, what did they do about checking Tasmanian practice at the time?

- Why didn't the relevant Tasmanian minister and department, both of which were made aware of the practice "in Tasmania" following the NSW Walker inquiry, according to Clause 16 of the Coroner's Findings report of September this year, why didn't they take action then, Mr President?
- Was the Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council subcommittee on autopsy practice's final report of April 2002 implemented, and if not, why not?
- Regarding the identification processes initiated in 2022, how was it that so many living close family members were not identified and contacted in a timely and trauma-informed manner?
- What was the role, and how integrated was, the University of Tasmania in the investigation following the 2016 notification by the R.A. Rodda Museum of Pathology's Curator to the Coroner's Office of concerns regarding some of the samples retained in its collection?
- What planning and care was invested in ensuring an adequately trauma-informed approach was developed and implemented in the interest of looking after bereaved family members during all stages of the coronial inquiry and its aftermath?

Unfortunately, for many the recent investigation undertaken by the Coroner's Office raised further concerns and questions.

These matters may be pursued under the current Tasmanian Law Reform Institute's review of the *Coroners Act 1995*, which was referred to the TLRI by the Attorney-General in early May of this year in light of serious concerns raised by the family of Eden Westbrook.

Although that TLRI reference preceded the Coroner's Findings of this particular matter, it may also provide a useful vehicle by which related concerns can be raised, and future reforms identified.

Mr President, I acknowledge that both the current Health Minister and Attorney-General have initiated relevant inquiries within their respective portfolios, following the release of the Coroner's Findings, as a result of advocacy by myself and others, regarding previous and current practices.

I state on the record now, that I hope any answers derived from these recently instigated enquiries are frank, rigorous and complete at the time they are delivered.

Further, that those answers are provided well before the planned formal parliamentary apology.

It may transpire that little further detail could be ascertained, that records were not kept as they should have been.

We know that answers may not always tell us what we want to hear, but all those who have contacted my office want is to know that questions have been asked by the authorities, thorough investigations have occurred, and – crucially – the answers are honest, frank, do not cut corners and, therefore, can be trusted.

To reiterate, Mr President, I recognise the additional enquiries and referrals made by the Health Minister and Attorney General respectively, however much is weighing on the degree those enquiries deliver full and satisfactory responses.

Crucially, clear answers are need to:

- Were any laws broken at the time of autopsy body part removal?
- Who was responsible, and who had oversight of those responsible?; and
- What is being done about holding those responsible accountable now?

To put it bluntly, Mr President, I fear that failure in this regard risks undermining any future State Apology, rendering it a shallow hand-wringing exercise, rather than signalling genuine responsibility so very necessary to ensure affected Tasmanians may be able to transition from their current journey of trauma onto an eventual road to recovery.

To touch briefly on the future Apology, Mr President.

We have heard that the government is committed to ensuring proper consultation will occur with those affected prior to the Apology's finalisation and delivery.

I welcome that commitment, and reiterate my offer to assist in any appropriate manner where I can.

I also reiterate those calls, some of which were also raised in the Assembly last week, that consideration be given to any practical assistance which could be provided for those affected Tasmanians living in the north and north-west, or remotely in other regions, to travel to Parliament House for that Apology.

I am also aware of some family members who now live interstate, who may need assistance to link in online, for example.

And sadly, we know there may also be some for whom this is all too hurtful and over-whelming, and will be unable to take part in any further commemorations at all.

I also wish to take this opportunity to reiterate my previous calls that there is some formal involvement of the University of Tasmania in the consultation and liaison processes surrounding the development and delivery of the formal State Apology.

If there is a shared culpability, then there should also be a shared responsibility.

Conclusion

To conclude Mr President, I welcome the delivery of this Ministerial Statement and the outlined commitment by government to a subsequent formal parliamentary apology, to be delivered within the first half of next year.

Again, for the purposes of clarification – particularly for anyone who may be listening via the broadcast – this debate underway now is **not** that formal apology.

Instead, today's Ministerial Statement is an explanatory precursor, if you will.

As I mentioned earlier, I requested this step of a ministerial statement update this year for the purpose of placing firmly upon the public record for those affected, the government's – and this parliament's – commitment to formally acknowledge the wrong committed, and the hurt and trauma inflicted.

People needed to hear that commitment sooner rather than later.

They needed, and deserved, to now what follow-up steps and enquiries were being made by the authorities.

And, given the shocks already inflicted by hearing via newspaper adverts or news reports about these unacceptable acts perpetrated upon their loved ones, people deserved advance warning of something which, although desperately needed, will still be deeply distressing to sit through, as the eventual formal apology will prove to be for many.

So that was the primary purpose of this Ministerial Statement, Mr President.

In light of the areas of silence within the Coroner's Findings Report and the subsequent silence from the authorities in response to that report, this ministerial statement was requested by myself for the government to provide a formal update of ongoing efforts to fill those gaps and areas of silence, and also a commitment to both those affected and the parliament that a formal apology will be delivered.

I was also concerned that the awful anniversary of January 25 did not come around next year without an update being provided to all those affected bereaved Tasmanians.

Clearly that timeframe provided insufficient time to undertake the necessary community consultation and preparation for a formal apology – hence this update before parliament rises at the end of the year was necessary.

I thank the Attorney-General and Health Minister for acting on my request, and further, that the Ministerial Statement was provided in both Chambers, which is not a usual or common parliamentary practice, to allow all Members of this Parliament the opportunity to address this matter on behalf of their constituents should they so wish.

A systemic failing as grievous as this warrants that degree of gravitas, I believe.

Further, the additional purpose of the Ministerial Statement was to acknowledge there is more work to be done between now and the eventual formal parliamentary apology.

We know that; the government knows that.

Those family members affected by this travesty expect that.

There will be no closure without it.

As outlined above, it has in fact, been traumatic navigating the administrative process and to get to this stage of proceedings for many affected family members, additional to the trauma initially inflicted by the death of their loved one.

To close, I will reiterate a statement, or a plea, I made in correspondence to the Attorney-General in September this year:

While recognising the Coroner's Findings emphasises these abhorrent practices are historic, and ceased in the 1990s, that does not diminish the fact that the hurt, trauma and anger caused to living family members by recent revelations is very current and deeply felt.

Mr President, although these abhorrent practices may be historic, for many the hurt, grief and trauma remains very real and very current.

For many affected, who lost their loved one in deeply traumatic circumstances, they have been forced to grieve twice, and in some case even bury their loved one twice.

We cannot undo the past, but we can, and we must, do our share of heavy-lifting to take responsibility and do what ever it takes to alleviate that hurt and anger, to deliver some semblance of peace, closure and healing for the bereaved who have been forced to grieve twice.

I note the Ministerial Statement.