

**2025**

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE  
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**ELEVENTH ASSEMBLY**

**Coroners Report - Inquest into the death of Jessica Hilary Bovill**

**Government Response**

Presented by  
Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA  
Minister for Health  
May 2025

## **INTRODUCTION**

Jessica Hilary Bovill was transported to Canberra Hospital on 8 December 2020 after she was found unconscious at her home by her husband.

During her treatment, Ms Bovill was administered sodium bicarbonate in doses that far exceeded the therapeutic guidelines. Because of this, Ms Bovill suffered brain swelling and neurological injury, remaining in the care of Canberra Health Services from 8 to 11 December 2020, where treatment was provided to try to improve her condition. Unfortunately, this was not successful and Ms Bovill died at Canberra Hospital on 11 December 2020.

Ms Bovill's death was referred to the ACT Coroner and Coroner Ken Archer handed down his final findings on 26 February 2025, providing two recommendations.

The ACT Government offers its condolences to Ms Bovill's family and friends. We acknowledge that there were shortcomings in the care Ms Bovill received and sincerely apologise to her loved ones.

## **CORONER'S REPORT**

Coroner Archer's report indicates that in treating Ms Bovill, clinicians should have sought expert toxicologist advice much earlier in her care. Following clinical guidelines available at the time of Ms Bovill's death could have reduced the volume of sodium bicarbonate administered.

Coroner Archer further outlined that he was unable to determine whether Ms Bovill could have survived her admitting condition if she was not administered the excessive dosage of sodium bicarbonate. However, Coroner Archer determined that the brain injury that Ms Bovill sustained was unlikely to have originated from her admitting condition.

These findings resulted in Coroner Archer determining that there were matters of public safety following the inquest into Ms Bovill's death. To address the matters of public safety, Coroner Archer made two recommendations.

1. Coroner Archer found that there was no mandatory requirement to seek toxicological advice from the Poisons Information Centre in respect of TCA overdoses, and to consult the Guidelines in the case of a TCA overdose. Coroner Archer recommended that processes at Canberra

Hospital be reviewed to ensure that Emergency Department (ED) staff are alerted to the need to:

- a. Seek out any such advice from a toxicology consultant at the Poisons Information Centre when patients present to the ED with a potential TCA overdose; and/or
  - b. consult the Guidelines or other officially approved advice as to the treatment of such cases.
2. Coroner Archer also recommended that processes are reviewed with the view to limiting the availability of sodium bicarbonate to a central point of supply.

## GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

The ACT Government acknowledges Coroner's Archer's findings and accepts all recommendations made following the inquest into Ms Bovill's death.

Recommendation 1: That processes at Canberra Hospital be reviewed to ensure that Emergency Department staff are alerted to the need to:

- a. Seek out any such advice from a toxicology consultant at the Poisons Information Centre when patients present to the ED with a potential TCA overdose; and/or
- b. consult the Guidelines or other officially approved advice as to the treatment of such cases.

| ACT Government Position | Implementation Timeframe |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Agreed                  | Completed                |

Following Ms Bovill's death, Canberra Health Services developed the *Emergency Department presentations of Life-Threatening Poisoning Guideline – CHS21/507* which was issued on 9 September 2021.

This document was developed to provide clinical staff with clear escalation points to support decision making related to life-threatening poisoning presentations. The document provides clear guidance to nursing and medical staff to ensure that best practice, appropriate treatments are provided in a timely manner.

Whilst the document is targeted to use across Canberra Health Services Emergency Departments, it is also available across all inpatient clinical environments to support decision making.

The Guideline requires that staff contact the Poisons Information Centre in the event of any patient requiring antidote therapy and if otherwise clinically indicated. The Poisons Information Centre is a 24/7 service, delivered by the NSW Government and is staffed by Clinical Toxicologists from around Australia. This service ensures that staff are provided specialist expertise in the medical management of human poisoning.

As part of the review following Ms Bovill's death, Canberra Health Services also updated the *ED Nursing Education Booklet Green Level V9.1*. This document is provided to nurses being orientated to work in the resuscitation area of the Emergency Department. The document has been updated in line with *Emergency Department presentations of Life-Threatening Poisoning Guideline – CHS21/507* to ensure that Emergency Department nurses are familiar with the guidelines for these presentations.

**Recommendation 2:** That processes are reviewed with the view to limiting the availability of sodium bicarbonate to a central point of supply.

| <b>ACT Government Position</b> | <b>Implementation Timeframe</b> |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Agreed                         | Completed                       |

Canberra Health Services acknowledges the recommendation to have a central point of supply for sodium bicarbonate and has undertaken a review.

This work identified that it is critical for a supply of sodium bicarbonate to be available in areas such as Emergency Departments and the Intensive Care Units to ensure it can be administered immediately for time-sensitive clinical indications. Canberra Health Services will continue to have small amounts of sodium bicarbonate in Emergency Departments in secured resuscitation trolleys as an available first line treatment for poisoning. However, the volume of available sodium bicarbonate has been reduced since Ms Bovill's death.

Since Ms Bovill's admission, Canberra Health Services has implemented the Digital Health Record (DHR) which has provided many benefits to clinical safety, including those specifically relevant to sodium bicarbonate. At the time of Ms Bovill's admission, sodium bicarbonate could be ordered verbally, with administration recorded on paper medication charts.

During the implementation of the DHR, Canberra Health Services and the ACT Health Directorate placed restrictions on the ability to order sodium bicarbonate.

Within the DHR, sodium bicarbonate requires a documented order before it can be administered – a verbal order cannot be given. The default frequency of sodium bicarbonate is 'once', and if additional doses are clinically indicated, an additional documented electronic order is required. If this occurs, the DHR will alert clinical staff that a dose or doses have already been given and will require documentation of clinical rationale before a duplicate order can be entered. This requires the clinician to acknowledge prior doses.

## **CONCLUSION**

The ACT Government is committed to improving the care delivered to patients and their families. While every effort is taken to deliver safe care, Canberra Health Services acknowledges that clinical incidents do occur, even with the best controls in place. Canberra Health Services is committed to transparency and openness to rectify shortcomings in the delivery of treatment and care, and to improve systems and processes that support effective clinical decision making.

Since Ms Bovill's death and prior to the handing down of Coroner Archer's recommendations, Canberra Health Services implemented a suite of changes to improve patient safety. The hardwiring of certain functions in the DHR now ensures staff have access to patient information and evidence-based prescribing.

The ACT Government acknowledges the impact Ms Bovill's death continues to have on her family and loved ones and again extends its apologies and condolences for this tragic loss.