

Australia Inmate's Death Raises Custody Concerns

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The recent death of an Aboriginal man in custody has prompted scrutiny of prison communication policies in New South Wales, Australia. Lathan Brown, a 28-year-old Indigenous man from the Kamilaroi and Barkandji communities, died on January 6, 2024, after suffering a sudden heart arrhythmia while on remand at Wellington Correctional Centre.

Brown's family, who had driven hours in hopes of seeing him, arrived just 10 minutes after he died in an Orange hospital. An inquest into his death concluded last week, with the deputy state coroner, Stuart Devine, stating the fatal medical event was not preventable but found that communication failures prevented the family from being at his bedside in his final moments.

The findings have highlighted gaps in New South Wales Corrective Services' protocols regarding serious inmate health emergencies. Paramedics responded to Brown's collapse shortly before 5 p.m., and he was first taken to Wellington Hospital. A correctional officer then contacted the family. However, unclear or incomplete updates led to a chain of confusion.

One of Brown's uncles contacted a prison officer around 6 p.m. and was informed that Brown would be transferred to Dubbo Hospital. Based on that information, Brown's father, Michael Brown, drove 150 kilometers from Orange to Dubbo. However, medical teams had instead arranged for Brown to be flown to Orange Health Service, where he died at 11:15 p.m. His father arrived at 11:25 p.m.

"We didn't get a chance to say goodbye," Michael Brown said in a statement released through the New South Wales Aboriginal Legal Service. "There was time wasted where we could have spent time with him, and we can never get that time back."

Coroner Devine recommended that New South Wales Corrective Services update its policies to ensure a senior officer manages communication with family members in cases where an inmate is gravely ill or near death.

The case also adds to broader concerns surrounding Indigenous deaths in custody. Devine acknowledged that Aboriginal Australians continue to be overrepresented in the state's prison population and are more likely to suffer poor health outcomes while incarcerated. While he did not assign blame to prison staff for Brown's death, the lack of coordinated communication was noted as a serious concern.

Devine also commended the Brown family for their "quiet dignity" in seeking transparency and justice. "They wanted to understand the full circumstances of Lathan's death, but also wanted to be part of any positive change that could arise from his passing," he stated.

Though this tragedy occurred in Australia, it mirrors concerns raised across the United States regarding inmate healthcare, family notification procedures, and the treatment of minority populations in the criminal justice system. The issue has stirred further debate about institutional practices and how correctional agencies handle sensitive and life-threatening situations involving inmates.