

Jury rules death of toddler, 3, a homicide

PRINCE GEORGE: Savannah Hall died from a brain injury due to suffocation, no blame assigned

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A Prince George inquest jury deliberated for nine hours over the weekend before ruling the death of three-year-old Savannah Hall was a homicide.

The five-woman coroner's jury found that the toddler died from a brain injury due to suffocation. The ruling does not assign blame.

Savannah was taken by her Prince George foster parents to hospital in 2001 with massive brain swelling, hypothermia and multiple bruises.

The inquest jury made 26 recommendations, most directed at the Ministry of Children and Families:

- Social workers should be available to promptly investigate allegations involving potential harm to a child.

- Foster parents should be trained in first-aid.

- The Child Development Centre of Prince George should in future report to the ministry any observations of suspicious bruises.

- Rules in foster homes related to the use of physical restraints should be revised.

The recommendations contain a clear call for reform, said MLA Nicholas Simons (Powell River-Sunshine Coast), the NDP's children and families critic. "We have to use our outrage to call on proper management of the Ministry of Children and Families," said Simons. "Social workers need to have the time at their disposal to do in-depth work in foster homes."

Simons said information given at the coroner's inquest last week was "deeply troubling."

"It's such a sad situation. Part of her short life was spent in a windowless room in a playpen



SAVANNAH HALL

with a [restraining] harness.

"The jury heard various forms of abuse on the child, including swelling of the brain and bruises, which haven't been explained.

"The new information could lead officials of the criminal justice branch to have another look at the case."

RCMP say the toddler's death, which occurred almost seven years ago, is an open case.

During the inquest last week, foster mother Patricia Keene told the jury that the little girl had been unwell for 10 days.

Keene, who took in Savannah in 1998, believed the child was developmentally delayed as a result of fetal-alcohol syndrome. That syndrome was not diagnosed by a physician who saw her twice.

Keene said the girl wasn't very sociable, often fighting with other kids. She denied she abused or neglected foster children in her care, despite complaints by other foster kids that she put them in cold showers as punishment.

Simons said foster homes are the wrong places for physical restraints. And he said more social workers are needed "on the front lines" to check up on foster homes.

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