

Coroner: Self-help course led to woman's suicide

December 8 2009, By KRISTEN GELINEAU , Associated Press Writer



David Booth arrives at the Glebb Coroners Court in Sydney, Australia, Tuesday, Dec. 8, 2009, to hear the results of a coroners inquest into the death of his wife Rebekah Lawrence. Lawrence suffered a psychotic episode in 2005 and leaped to her death from an office window. The coroner found that her participation in an intense self-help seminar called The Turning Point led to her psychotic breakdown and death. (AP Photo/Rob Griffith)

(AP) -- An Australian coroner said Tuesday that participation in an intense self-help course led a woman to suffer a psychotic breakdown before she stripped naked and leaped to her death from an office window in front of horrified co-workers.

The coroner's findings come four years after 34-year-old Rebekah Lawrence's death in Sydney, providing a sense of relief to family

members who had long argued the young woman never would have killed herself if not for her participation in a seminar called The Turning Point.

"The evidence is overwhelming that the act of stepping out of a window to her death was the tragic culmination of a developing [psychosis](#) that had its origins in a self-development course known as 'The Turning Point,'" Deputy State Coroner Malcolm MacPherson said as he read his findings.

In Australia, a coroner investigates the circumstances of unusual deaths in court-like proceedings called an inquest and can recommend further action by police or prosecutors if warranted.

MacPherson did not recommend any charges be filed against Turning Point officials. But he did suggest that laws be drafted to require that those offering self-development seminars be qualified and accredited.

"Rebekah's death isn't in vain - it's helped a lot of people who may have come to the same grim end in the future," Lawrence's husband, David Booth, said outside court. "I'm not angry, because they didn't mean to do it. It's just unqualified people doing damaging things to people's minds."

Lawrence's death on Dec. 20, 2005, came two days after she completed The Turning Point, a four-day seminar run by the Sydney self-development company People Knowhow.

Turning Point officials acknowledged during inquest hearings in August that the course was intense and included the controversial technique of childhood regressive therapy. Such therapy uses hypnotic techniques designed to emotionally regress people to childlike states so they can confront issues from their past.

Lawrence's behavior changed as the course progressed, and in the hours before her death, grew particularly childlike, to the point where she could no longer dress herself. Over the span of a few days, she began to forget basic things such as her favorite song, tried to command the family dog with her mind and spoke of a fear of death.

On her last day alive, co-workers recall she became increasingly erratic and placed dozens of calls to Turning Point officials. The normally shy and quiet woman then stripped off her clothes, screamed at and shoved her supervisor, burst into song and dove out the window.

An autopsy found no drugs or alcohol in her system, and she had no history of mental illness.

Lawyers for People Knowhow officials argued that Lawrence's psychotic state and subsequent death were likely caused by an undiagnosed mental condition, worsened by conflicting feelings she had recently had over whether to have children. Her husband did not want children and at 34, Lawrence felt her time to have them was running out - causing her severe emotional trauma, the lawyers said.

But MacPherson rejected that argument, saying there was powerful evidence Lawrence had decided she had time to resolve the issue.

Tom Kent, an attorney for People Knowhow director Geoff Kabealo, said he had not read the coroner's findings yet. Calls to People Knowhow's offices went unanswered.

Lawrence had called course officials the night before her death, and she was clearly agitated, talking about her childhood and a disturbing movie she had recently seen about exorcisms, according to evidence in the case file. One official advised her to have a cup of tea and a warm shower and to be kind to herself.

In his findings, MacPherson said officials clearly missed a call for help that night.

"Those persons were simply ill equipped to know that this was a serious situation and Rebekah needed medical - or at least psychological - intervention," the coroner said.

In Australia, the psychotherapy and counseling industries are self-regulated, with no mandated training or accreditation requirements. Kabealo has a degree in business administration. Turning Point leader Richard Arthur has a degree in computer science.

MacPherson suggested a law be introduced to require that anyone providing therapy or counseling services have a formal qualification from an accredited institution. He also recommended mandatory accreditation for psychotherapists and counselors.

Lawrence's sister, Kate Lawrence-Haynes, said she hopes the results will help create more awareness about the lack of regulation of the self-help industry.

"Tread carefully - look what is in the courses," she said. "If they don't tell you what is in the courses before you attend them - they promise you the world, promise you happiness - then that's a red flag for them not being genuine. They're businesses."

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Citation: Coroner: Self-help course led to woman's suicide (2009, December 8) retrieved 21 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-12-coroner-self-help-woman-suicide.html>

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