



OFFICE OF THE STATE CORONER

FINDINGS OF INVESTIGATION

CITATION: **Non-inquest findings into the death of Seth David Beckman**

TITLE OF COURT: Coroner's Court

JURISDICTION: Brisbane

DATE: 30 June 2015

FILE NO(s): 2015/333

FINDINGS OF: Christine Clements, Brisbane Coroner

CATCHWORDS: CORONERS: Investigation, drowning in residential swimming pool, hyperventilation, shallow water blackout

Seth David Beckman lived at Ormeley Street, Stafford Heights in Queensland. He lived with his wife, Jessica and their 17 month old daughter. Seth Beckman died on 26 of January 2015 at Chuter Street, Stafford Heights in Queensland. This was his twin brother's home. Seth died after immersing himself in the residential swimming pool and trying to hold his breath for as long as possible. He was retrieved from the pool after four minutes but he could not be resuscitated. He was 34 years of age at the time of his death. His death was reported to the coroner.

Background

Seth Beckman had a twin brother named Christian. The two men and their respective wives and children were close and often spent time together.

On Monday 26 January, which was a holiday, Christian sent his brother a text message shortly before midday. He invited Seth, Seth's wife Jess (Jessica) and their child, Portia over to have a swim in their newly renovated pool. Jessica Beckman confirmed the family picked up Nando's chicken for lunch and ate at their home before proceeding to Chris' (Christian) house for a swim. When they arrived, Christian was feeding their youngest child with a bottle in the Bali hut structure. His wife Kasandra and their older child were swimming in the pool together with Kasandra's friend, Kylie.

Christian was facing away from the pool and glanced over his shoulder and noticed his brother Seth was practicing holding his breath. The brothers have spearfished since they were eight years of age and they would frequently practice holding their breath. Christian said they would have competitions with each other to see who could hold their breath for the longest. Every time they swam they would practice this, irrespective of whether they were with each other or not.

Christian said if they were really trying to break their own records they would hyperventilate prior to going underwater to relax and allow them to stay under longer.

Christian recalled an incident in Thailand about three years earlier when he was trying to hold his breath for a long period. He asked his wife, Kas to monitor him and to get him if he stayed underwater for three minutes. She did so and Christian realized that he was momentarily unconscious. He said it felt like he was dreaming and he was not aware that he was holding his breath. He had hyperventilated before going under water. This incident made Christian realize the potential risks. After this he would tell his brother Seth not to breathe deeply so much. He was concerned what might have happened to him had he not been rescued by Kas on that earlier occasion.

However, his brother Seth would not listen to him and would often tell him he would breathe deeply until he felt a bit dizzy prior to going underwater to hold his breath.

Christian decided to time Seth underwater when he observed what he was doing. He started the phone about 10 seconds after Seth went beneath the water surface. When he resurfaced it was about two minutes having allowed for the 10 seconds. Christian knew that Seth's record for holding his breath was about two minutes 50 seconds.

When Seth came to the surface Christian said to him 'That was only 2 minutes.' Seth replied that he wasn't even trying and he could do better.

Seth then started preparing himself by taking deep breaths and moving slowly around in the water. Christian was still feeding his son. He kept looking back at the pool every ten to fifteen seconds but Seth was taking a long time before he went underwater.

Christian then realized his brother had gone underwater and he started the timer on his phone. He kept on feeding his son and monitoring the clock. When two minutes were up, he looked in his brother's direction but an inflatable toy was blocking his view. He turned back to his child, and waited for Seth to break the surface. The next time he looked at the clock on his phone he realized that three minutes had passed. He saw Seth at the bottom of the pool and saw a movement and bubbles coming up. He assumed at that point that Seth had in fact resurfaced whilst he was looking away. Alternatively, he thought his brother had improved dramatically in his capacity to stay underwater.

Christian said usually in his experience when your body moves and bubbles come out you're trying to fight the urge to breath. He thought Seth would surface in about ten to twenty seconds.

He turned back to his child, waiting to hear Seth breaking the surface of the water. When he heard nothing he assumed that Seth must have resurfaced and then gone underwater again. He did not think anything of it and looked at his phone. He then realized that four minutes had gone past and his brother Seth was in the same position as he had been at three minutes.

He then spoke to Seth's wife, Jess and asked her to check Seth as he had been under a bit long. Jess did so by using her foot underwater but her husband did not respond. Christian then jumped into the pool to check his brother. He went down to the bottom of the pool and picked him up. It wasn't until he lifted Seth's face out of the water that he realized what had happened. His brother's face was blue and he had a blue semi-circle area from shoulder to shoulder across his chest.

Jessica immediately called out to Kas to ring an ambulance, but she was already on the phone doing this.

Jessica had just completed her cardiopulmonary resuscitation refresher course two days earlier. She and Chris then brought Seth out of the pool and started cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Chris was doing compressions and Jessica was instructing him. After ten compressions Seth vomited and they rolled him to his side to clear his mouth.

After about every ten compressions Seth would vomit again and they repeatedly placed him in the recovery position to clear his mouth.

Jessica then took over compressions. They continued in this manner until ambulance officers arrived. Paramedics took over with Chris continuing to work

with them.

They were able to elicit a heartbeat from Seth and they readied him for transport to the hospital.

However, as they moved Seth down the side of the house on the stretcher his heart stopped again. Eventually they made the decision that Seth was unable to be resuscitated.

Previous medical history

Christian Beckman recalled that in 2004 Seth had told him his heart felt funny at times and he had anxiety attacks. He said he would experience this feeling for about six months and then the sensation would become less frequent. He had not sought medical advice and did not take any medications that his brother was aware of.

Both brothers had been physically active as they grew up, including performing gymnastics with explosive strength workouts.

On the day prior to Seth's death, the brothers had been drinking alcohol until about one or two in the morning. Christian recalled his brother drank Canadian Club and Dry and that they were fairly hungover. They had not consumed alcohol on 26 January.

Seth's wife Jessica said her husband was generally in good health and did not take any medications. However, over the three weeks prior to his death, Seth had been having trouble sleeping. This followed the recent sudden death of his father in a forklift accident at his home.

Autopsy

Autopsy examination was conducted on 28 January 2015 by the forensic pathologist Dr Milne.

External examination revealed minor abrasions on the left thumb, right thigh and right knee. None of these matters were significant.

CT imaging showed fluid in the cranial sinuses and hyperinflation of the lungs.

Histology testing of tissue under microscopic magnification showed wide spread aspiration of food material including meat.

There was also hypertrophy in the left ventricle of the heart and thickening. However, there were no features of a specific type of cardio myopathy of the heart and there were no recent ischaemic changes.

The pathologist noted the background information including the Queensland Ambulance Service Report and information from family members who were present when Seth died.

Seth was known to be a regular spear fisherman who would practice breath holding.

He was known to take several long deep breaths before going under water and had become light headed in the past. He was also known to have injected steroids.

The pathologist noted on internal post mortem examination that there were changes in the lungs consistent with drowning. There was aspiration of stomach contents. The heart had a thickened left ventricular wall of uncertain cause.

Toxicology testing revealed a blood level of alcohol measured at .09%. No other drugs were detected. Steroid testing was not performed.

Dr Milne concluded that Seth David Beckman died due to drowning. This was consistent with findings on CT examination, naked eye examination and microscopic examination.

Dr Milne noted the underlying reason for drowning was uncertain but may be associated with what is known as 'shallow water blackout'. This was particularly so if he had hyperventilated prior to holding his breath. This practice reduces the carbon dioxide level in the body which delays the urge to breath. This can lead to low oxygen levels, fainting and blackout. It can occur at shallow depths, including in a swimming pool environment.

Dr Milne noted Seth also had an abnormality in his heart with thickening of the left ventricular wall and non-specific changes observable under microscope. He could not exclude that there had been an abnormal heart rhythm that caused him to lose consciousness under water. The cause of these changes to the heart were uncertain although the pathologist noted there had been some reference to steroid use. Prolonged steroid use can cause the type of changes observed. It was also possible that Mr Beckman had a primary disorder of the heart muscle known as cardiomyopathy. The pathologist therefore recommended that first degree relatives consult their general practitioner for advice regarding any possible risk of cardiomyopathy.

Finally, the pathologist noted the alcohol level of .09% could have had some contribution to the events leading to death.

Conclusion

Seth David Beckman's drowning was a tragic misadventure witnessed by members of his own family in a backyard swimming pool.

Christine Clements
Brisbane Coroner
Brisbane
30 June 2015