



Ashley Smith coroner calls it a career

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The inquest into the death of a troubled teenager who strangled herself in an Ontario prison has been thrown into further turmoil with the presiding coroner's surprising decision to call it quits.

The family of Ashley Smith is in "utter shock and disbelief" over Bonita Porter's announcement Wednesday that she is handing the reins to another coroner, said Julian Falconer, lawyer for the teenager's parents and sister.



Video

[Ashley Smith incident in Grand Valley prison](#)



Video

[Video shows Ashley Smith days before she died](#)



Video

[Ashley Smith in prison days before her death](#)

Dr. Porter's departure is just the latest controversy in an inquest that has been shrouded in secrecy and beset by delays. Last week, Dr. Porter put the inquest on hold until Sept. 12 – nearly four years after Ms. Smith's death was caught on camera in a segregation cell at the Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener, Ont. The inquest was originally supposed to start in January of this year.

Because of the protracted length of the inquiry, Dr. Porter would not have been able to complete the inquest before she retires in November, Cheryl Mahyr, a spokeswoman in the Office of the Chief Coroner, said in an interview.

"She was hoping when the inquest initially started that she would be able to see it to its conclusion," Ms. Mahyr said.

The news that Dr. Porter is planning to retire came out of the blue for lawyers involved in the inquest. No mention of this was made last week when lawyers appeared before her, said Peter Jacobsen, one of the lawyers for news organizations who is trying to make the inquest more transparent.

Mr. Jacobsen, who is representing The Globe and Mail, said coroners have an obligation to rule on arguments made before them, but Dr. Porter is leaving before dealing with motions he and other lawyers presented last week.

"It is very odd for someone who has heard motions not to render a decision," Mr. Jacobsen said in an interview. "It puts us in very serious jeopardy of having to reargue all of the motions."

Mr. Falconer said it "simply boggles the mind" that the Chief Coroner's Office would assign someone to preside over the case who is retiring in November. "It has resulted in the waste of countless hours of expense and anxiety to the family," he said in an interview.

Ms. Mahyr countered that it makes sense for Dr. Porter to step down from the inquest now, so that her successor does not have to deal with rulings made by another coroner.

The high-profile examination into the death of Ms. Smith started on May 16 and heard just three days of evidence before being adjourned, first indefinitely and then until Sept. 12. The proceedings were put on hiatus in May after disagreements over whether key video evidence should be made public and how it might be distributed. Ms. Smith, a 19-year-old from Moncton,

N.B., with a history of mental illness, strangled herself in the Kitchener prison while jail guards watched.

Dr. Porter's decision to exclude some prison videos was successfully challenged at Ontario Divisional Court, which criticized the coroner for a decision the judges called "difficult to understand." She was to have decided what exhibits should be released and whether to obscure the faces of corrections staff in surveillance videos. She must also respond to a joint submission by all counsel on whether to seize videos from Quebec's Joliette Institution, including footage that is said to show Ms. Smith being forcibly injected with anti-psychotic drugs.

Ms. Smith was first incarcerated at age 15 for throwing crabapples at a postal worker and was subsequently transferred to 17 different correctional institutions across Canada. She died in her cell, in solitary confinement, strangled by a ligature after multiple suicide attempts.

Ontario Chief Coroner Andrew McCallum has appointed John Carlisle to replace Dr. Porter.