

Ashley Smith jury should see blunt video: family

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Ashley Smith of Moncton, N.B., strangled herself in an Ontario prison in 2007 as guards watched. ((Canadian Press))

The family of a New Brunswick teen who strangled herself in an Ontario prison while guards looked on says an upcoming coroner's inquest should include video of the teen being restrained and injected with anti-psychotic drugs.

Ashley Smith choked herself to death with a piece of cloth in a federal prison cell in Kitchener, Ont., in October 2007.

The coroner's inquest, set to begin April 4 in Toronto, will examine factors that may have impacted Smith's state of mind, coroner Bonita Porter said in November.

However, Smith's mother, Coralee Smith, was told the inquest won't include a video showing Smith being forcibly restrained and injected with anti-psychotic drugs at a federal prison in Joliette, Que., three months before she died.

"I think everyone in the world should see it ... to know what's happening inside to these people," Smith's mother said.

CBC's *The Fifth Estate* shares the story of Ashley Smith's harrowing life and the circumstances surrounding her death.

A lawyer with the coroner's office said it will be up to Smith's family to persuade Porter in writing to include the videos in the proceedings.

"At this point, [Porter] is not interested in getting this material," Eric Siebenmorgen said Tuesday.

"[But] she said, 'I'm open to be persuaded, but you're going to have to convince me.'"

Decision criticized

On Monday, the family lashed out at Porter's decision against seeking videotapes of Smith being forcibly restrained and administered anti-psychotic medication at Quebec's Joliette prison for women.

They also accused Porter of trying to avoid public scrutiny by insisting the family had to argue against her decision in writing.

Siebenmorgen said the public could have access to the written submissions but refused to say why Porter had decided - at least provisionally - against obtaining the video.

Julian Falconer, the lawyer who represents the Smith family, said they were dumbfounded as to why the coroner was forcing them to argue again for access to the video material.

"The Smith family spent significant financial resources and went through the burden of arguing these matters last October only to find now, a month before this inquest, that there is still no videotape," Falconer said Tuesday.

"This is exactly what we argued and no one opposed it. I'm at a complete loss as to where we are in this process."

The coroner's office has signalled it will rely on written reports and witness accounts of the incident in Quebec, CBC's Dave Seglins reported.

Family has support

Richard Macklin, a lawyer for Ontario's child and youth advocate office, agrees with the family.

"No inquest is of any use to anybody unless both sides of the picture are presented," said Macklin.

"Ms. Smith was a hard-to-handle inmate, and the inquest jury is going to get plenty of information about that," he said. "On the other hand, Corrections Canada contributed to her being a hard-to-handle inmate."

The Smith family believes that ignoring the videos will fail to expose the role prison officials may have played in their daughter's downward spiral.

Smith was in solitary confinement — and on suicide watch — when she strangled herself with a piece of cloth at the Grand Valley Institute for Women.

The 19-year-old had been transferred 17 times between institutions in the final year of her life, and spent most days in isolation, shackled and handcuffed.

As a teen, she was initially given a 90-day sentence for throwing crabapples at a postal worker. But in-custody incidents kept her behind bars.