

NATIONAL POST

Coroner's inquest into woman's death in Ontario prison set for April 4

January 11, 2011

By Linda Nguyen

TORONTO— An inquest looking into the death of 19-year-old Ashley Smith at an Ontario prison more than three years ago will begin on April 4.

Ms. Smith fatally strangled herself with a piece of cloth at the Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener, Ont., on Oct. 19, 2007.

It is expected that more than 100 witnesses will testify during the proceedings, which are aimed at examining how to prevent similar deaths in the future. The inquest should take anywhere from six to nine months, and will most likely recess during the summer before resuming in September. The inquest was originally slated to begin January 31, but family lawyer, Julian Falconer, asked for an adjournment Tuesday because Ms. Smith's mother recently underwent quadruple bypass surgery. Coralee Smith needed more time to recover before she could travel to Toronto from New Brunswick for the proceedings, he said.

"She's recovering. The family is recovering," said Mr. Falconer. "Of course, it will surprise no one that (she) intends to be here for this inquest and frankly, come hell or high water, she would attend and we were concerned it just wasn't safe."

The inquest, led by Ontario deputy chief coroner Dr. Bonita Porter, was originally supposed to look at the 13-week period Ms. Smith spent in Ontario prisons before she died. But last month, the scope was expanded to include the 11 months the young woman spent in federal custody.

During this time, Ms. Smith was transferred 17 times to prisons across the country due to her bad behaviour, staff fatigue and overcrowding.

Her family is calling for an RCMP investigation into their daughter's treatment in the prisons, which they allege amount to abuse.

A report later suggested that Smith's death may not have been a suicide, but an accident. A video of the incident later showed prison staff had looked on until the young woman stopped breathing before helping her.

In another instance at the Joliette Institution in Quebec, where according to another report, Ms. Smith was heavily medicated with antipsychotic drugs against her will to prepare her for an upcoming prison transfer. Ms. Smith was given four high-level injections over the course of two hours, despite showing no signs of delusions or psychotic behaviours.

Ms. Smith had been incarcerated since the age of 15, when she was sent to prison for throwing crab apples at a postal worker in her hometown of Moncton, N.B.

Her continued imprisonment was the result of racking up multiple charges while incarcerated.