

No place for secrecy in teen suicide inquests

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Ashley Smith shown in a coroner's video.

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Flawed inquests into the suicides of two teenagers, both while in custody in Ontario, are doing little to assure the public that necessary light will be shed on these tragedies.

A high-profile examination of Ashley Smith's 2007 death by hanging has been put off until Sept. 12. This after a series of controversies, including whether key video evidence should be shown, and a coroner's ruling threatening lawyers with contempt on sharing exhibits with the media. Smith, a 19-year-old with a history of mental illness, strangled herself in a Kitchener prison while jail guards watched.

At a separate inquest, provincial lawyers are trying to keep a lid on circumstances surrounding the death of a 17-year-old boy in custody at the Syl Apps Youth Centre in Oakville. Identified only as G.A, the youth hanged himself with a shoelace in 2008.

That hearing began on June 8, but lawyers for the attorney general and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services are working to block a Toronto Star request to view documents in the case.

They even objected to disclosing a court order explaining *why* the public shouldn't see this material.

On Monday, presiding coroner Dirk Huyer said the Star was entitled to see that order, with the teen's name blacked out. But provincial lawyers asked for two days to consult on possible further legal action. The official explanation for secrecy is that young people in trouble with the law, like G.A., are entitled to confidentiality under the Youth Criminal Justice Act.

In other words, lawyers in Ontario's bureaucracy want to keep details secret after a boy died in provincial care — on grounds that they're protecting, not the bureaucracy, but the dead boy's privacy.

Ontarians have every right to wonder what, in the name of mercy, is going on here? The Ashley Smith inquest began last month but jurors have scarcely heard any evidence. Presiding coroner Bonita Porter's decision to exclude some prison videos was declared an error in Divisional Court; prison guards want their on-screen faces blurred and, just last week, the coroner unexpectedly proposed webcasting the inquest. Now, it's put off until September.

In light of this litany of delay and reversal, one would think provincial lawyers involved in the G.A. hearing would hesitate to burden yet another inquest into a teen suicide with questionable wrangling. Of course, one would be wrong.

The purpose of an inquest is to fully uncover what led to a person's death so that similar tragedies can be avoided. But that demands a fair and open process. It's hard to see how this task will be accomplished unless these two inquests do better. The worst outcome of all would be if Ashley Smith and G.A. died in vain.

