

Aboriginal man who died in NSW jail after asthma attack was slapped by nurse, inquest hears

The 36-years-old's condition was already life-threatening when he called for help, the coroners court was told



Makayla Reynolds (left) and Taleah Reynolds outside the inquest at Lidcombe coroners court into their brother Nathan Reynolds' asthma-related death in custody in 2018.

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Indigenous man Nathan Reynolds, who suffered from asthma, was slapped in the face by a prison nurse and told he was having a drug overdose when he was struggling to breathe, a Sydney inquest has heard.

The inquest into the 36-year-old's fatal asthma attack began on Monday with questions raised about the quality of care the father-of-one received while in a minimum-security wing of a Sydney jail.

Fellow inmate Jeremy Preo broke down in tears as he described trying to help Reynolds who went stiff while struggling to breathe on the night of 31 August 2018.

~~Lidcombe coroners court~~ ~~photoside: AAP~~ inquest before it began on Monday at

Preo, who was trained in first aid, placed Reynolds in the recovery position and did his best to open the man's mouth and airways. "He's done like a big gurgle and that's when I started rubbing my arm on his back and said, 'Mate, keep breathing'," Preo told the NSW coroners court while wiping his eyes. "He was alive then. He could hear me."

Minutes later, about 11.49pm, the only registered nurse at the prison that night, Casey Wright, arrived on the scene. Preo said he was relieved and told her Reynolds was breathing but had some yellow fluid coming out of his airways.

But he was distressed after seeing her roll Reynolds onto his back.

“I’ve seen her ... slap Nathan in the face and aggressively shake him, and telling him to wake up,” Preo said on Monday. “The nurse then said to (prison officer John Fifita) that Nathan’s had a drug overdose.”

After Fifita asked what drugs Reynolds had taken, Preo retorted: “How can you say that after you’ve sat there ... and watched him have an asthma attack?”

Wright is due to testify about her version of events later in the inquest.

CPR began shortly after Wright’s arrival and continued when paramedics showed up about 12.14am. Thirty minutes later, and 77 minutes after he first radioed prison guards about his breathing difficulties, Reynolds was declared dead.

He had earlier been seen seated on a couch next to Fifita taking short breaths and puffs of Ventolin.

“He wasn’t (talking). He was in a rhythm with his breathing,” Preo said. When he said Reynolds needed to be taken to the medical centre and put on oxygen, prison officers replied they couldn’t administer medical treatment, Preo told the court.



Nathan Reynolds in a picture held by his mother, Jodie Reynolds.

The inquest is expected to hear from a respiratory specialist, Prof Greg King, that when Reynolds radioed for help at 11.27pm his condition was already severe and life-threatening and the window to prevent his death was very narrow.

King is expected to say Reynolds was likely in respiratory arrest and needed to be administered oxygen by mask and either nebulised Ventolin or a puffer with a spacer, the counsel assisting, Chris McGorey, said in his opening address on Monday.

Wright wasn't called until after 11.40pm when the prison officers arrived. McGorey said records at the South Windsor prison showed Reynolds had been issued with Ventolin inhalers at least six times.

From time to time, he may have also borrowed and used other inmates' puffers and been issued puffers by staff who failed to document the event, McGorey said.

Noting about 400 Australians die each year of asthma, the barrister said preventer medicines have reduced attacks but the challenge remained in identifying those at risk of severe attacks.

Inmates, nurses, guards and a doctor who treated Reynolds are expected to give evidence. Reynolds' sisters, who attended Monday's hearing alongside her brother's partner and mother, said they want truth and justice.

"Nathan died on the cold floor of a prison, with no loved ones around him. He was just 36 years old - he died far too young," Taleah and Makayla Reynolds said in a statement.