
JURISDICTION : CORONER'S COURT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
ACT : CORONERS ACT 1996
CORONER : SARAH HELEN LINTON, DEPUTY STATE CORONER
HEARD : 2 AUGUST 2022
DELIVERED : 21 SEPTEMBER 2022
FILE NO/S : CORC 1699 of 2020
DECEASED : PALKOVICS, ROLAND

Catchwords:

Nil

Legislation:

Nil

Counsel Appearing:

Senior Constable C Robertson assisted the Coroner

Case(s) referred to in decision(s):

Nil

Coroners Act 1996
(Section 26(1))

AMENDED RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

*I, Sarah Helen Linton, Deputy State Coroner, having investigated the death of **Roland PALKOVICS** with an inquest held at Perth Coroners Court, Central Law Courts, Court 85, 501 Hay Street, Perth, on 2 August 2022, find that the death of **Roland PALKOVICS** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was **Roland PALKOVICS** and that death occurred on or about **22 July 2020** in the waters of the Indian Ocean, at 'The Spot', West Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands (12°10'S, 96°49'E), as a result of an unknown cause in the following circumstances:*

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INTRODUCTION

1. Roland Palkovics ('Mr Palkovics') was last seen alive when he left his home on West Island in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands ('Cocos Island') at about 7.10 am on 22 July 2020. He intended to go to "The Spot", a beach on the western side of West Island, about three kilometres from the West Island Township. It is popular with beginner surfers and stand-up paddleboarders, and Mr Palkovics intended to go stand-up paddle boarding there.
2. Mr Palkovics would often stand-up paddle board at 'The Spot' and knew the area well. He was considered to be very proficient at stand-up paddleboarding and rarely fell off. He was not known to have ever got into difficulty at 'The Spot' before.
3. An acquaintance of Mr Palkovics, Mr Rik Soderlund ('Mr Soderlund'), drove past 'The Spot' at about 7.20 am and saw Mr Palkovics' car parked there. At about 7.30 am, as Mr Soderlund drove past 'The Spot' again, he observed Mr Palkovics' paddleboard floating unattended in the water. There was no sign of Mr Palkovics. After pulling up and concentrating on the water to try to find Mr Palkovics, Mr Soderlund thought he saw a body in the water. He immediately left the beach to notify the local medical staff as he thought Mr Palkovics might need medical attention. In the meantime, another person paddled out into the water but was unable to locate the body that had possibly been seen. Mr Palkovics' paddleboard was, however, able to be retrieved as it had floated towards the shore.
4. Police officers and local volunteers attended the area immediately and an extensive search was conducted of the surrounding land and sea. The only other item of interest located during the search was Mr Palkovics' black paddle used for stand-up paddleboarding. It was found floating in the water near the shore not long after the search commenced. The search continued the following day, with nothing further of interest found. The search was suspended on the evening of 23 July 2020 as it was determined there was no chance of finding Mr Palkovics alive by that stage.
5. Australian Federal Police ('AFP') officers based at Cocos Island Police Station prepared a report for the State Coroner in relation to Mr Palkovics' disappearance. On the basis of the information provided by the AFP in relation to Mr Palkovics' disappearance, I determined that pursuant to s 23 of the *Coroners Act 1996* (WA), there was reasonable cause to suspect that Mr Palkovics had died and his death was a reportable death. I therefore made a direction that a coroner hold an inquest into the circumstances of the suspected death.¹
6. I held an inquest at the Perth Coroner's Court on 2 August 2022. The inquest consisted of tendering documentary evidence compiled during the police investigation conducted into Mr Palkovics' disappearance, and hearing evidence from the investigating officer, Leading Senior Constable Benjamin Owens ('LSC Owens'), Mr Soderlund, and Mr Palkovics' employer, Levi Fowler ('Mr Fowler').

¹ Section 23 *Coroners Act* Direction of Deputy State Coroner.

BACKGROUND

7. Mr Palkovics was born in Vienna, Austria. After completing high school, he completed compulsory military service and then worked for the Austrian Postal Service while he studied Information Technology Management at university. Mr Palkovics then founded an Information Technology training centre in Austria. Mr Palkovics moved to Western Australia ('WA') in 2007. He received many job offers from recruitment agency, but chose to continue to work in information technology with an Information Technology Solutions Company called R-Group International.²
8. In 2013, Mr Palkovics completed training with Microsoft in the United States of America funded by R-Group, which qualified him as a Microsoft Certified Solutions Master. He was the only person in Western Australia and probably in Australia to hold that qualification at the time.³
9. In the same year, Mr Palkovics met Sandie O'Neill ('Ms O'Neill') and they commenced a relationship. R-Group was based in Perth, but Mr Palkovics was permitted to work remotely.⁴
10. Mr Palkovics and Ms O'Neill relocated from WA to the Cocos Island in July 2015. While living on the island, Mr Palkovics commenced employment as a communications technician for Cocos Keeling Islands Solutions, owned by Mr Fowler. Mr Palkovics also worked for Cocos Communication and Information Technology Pty Ltd in Cocos Island. Moreover, Mr Palkovics still worked remotely for R-Group. During 2015, Mr Palkovics became an Australian Citizen at a ceremony held on the Cocos Island.⁵
11. Ms O'Neill became pregnant in early 2016 and gave birth to their son, Oliver, on 20 September 2016. Mr Palkovics and Ms O'Neill travelled to Perth for the birth, and the family of three travelled back to Cocos Island together. In May 2017, Mr Palkovics told Ms O'Neill he no longer wanted to continue their relationship. Ms O'Neill relocated to Perth with their son Oliver shortly after.⁶
12. In February 2019, Mr Palkovics met Jane Trinder ('Ms Trinder'). After travelling to Perth to see his son a few times a year, Mr Palkovics moved back to Perth to live in March 2019 and moved in with Ms Trinder. Mr Palkovics lived in Perth with Ms Trinder and spent increasing periods of time with Oliver. Mr Palkovics last saw his son on the weekend of 27 to 28 June 2020, when they spent the weekend together. Mr Palkovics and Ms Trinder then moved back to live on Cocos Island and they purchased the property he and Ms O'Neill had co-owned on Cocos Island on 29 June 2020. Ms O'Neill also continued to own a home in Perth.⁷

² Exhibit 1, Tab 1.

³ Exhibit 1, Tab 1.

⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 1.

⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 1.

⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 1 and Tab 4.

⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

13. Mr Palkovics and Ms Trinder were staying in a room at Cocos Seaview Accommodation, owned by Mr Fowler, after returning to Cocos Island. Ms Trinder was managing the accommodation complex for Mr Fowler.⁸
14. Mr Palkovics and Ms Trinder had been stand-up paddleboarding twice, both times at 'The Spot' since they came back to Cocos Island. Ms Trinder advised that Mr Palkovics had been there many times before. When paddleboarding, Mr Palkovics would usually paddle further out to catch the larger waves, positioned himself in the water slightly left of the steps on the beach, and caught waves that moved him north.⁹
15. A photograph taken by Ms Trinder of Mr Palkovics paddleboarding a week before his disappearance shows him very competently surfing a wave on a red board with a black paddle, which were the same items of equipment he was believed to be using on the day he disappeared.



Exhibit 1, Tab 7

⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 6.

⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 6.

LAST KNOWN CONTACT

16. On the evening of Tuesday, 21 July 2020, Mr Palkovics told Ms Trinder that they would go out for a stand-up paddle at 8.00 am the next day. She understood they would be going to 'The Spot', because it was the only place they paddled together. They both went to sleep at about 9.30 pm.¹⁰
17. The next morning at about 6.30 am on Wednesday, 22 July 2020, Ms Trinder woke up and saw Mr Palkovics had already got out of bed and was taking a shower. He finished his shower at about 6.45 am, came out of the bathroom and spoke to her. Mr Palkovics told Ms Trinder that it would be better if they went stand-up paddleboarding earlier and he said he would be going soon. Ms Trinder told him that she had a few chores to finish first, so she would meet him at 'The Spot' a bit later.¹¹
18. Ms Trinder went outside to do some gardening, and saw Mr Palkovics driving away in his silver dual cab Nissan ute at about 7.10 am. He blew a kiss to Ms Trinder through the windscreen then waved his hand at her as he drove away. This was the last time anyone reported actually seeing Mr Palkovics. The evidence indicates he drove directly to 'The Spot' and started stand-up paddleboarding shortly after.¹²
19. 'The Spot' has a small sandy beach, the width of which depends on the tide. In the water, the initial 20 to 30 metres from the shore is broken reef floor with some sand patches, followed by solid reef out to the breakers. At a distance of about 100 to 150 metres from the beach, the waves break over a coral shelf. Beyond the breakers, the depth increases to 6 to 20 metres with a gradual drop off to about 40 metres. This is followed by a steep drop off to the very deep open water of the Indian Ocean.¹³
20. There is a fixed rip north of the stairs at 'The Spot', which produces a strong outflow of water. Other currents are dependent on the waves, which vary depending on the location and the time of year. Closer to the beach, the waves are smaller, but as you progress out further, there are larger waves breaking over the coral shelf. The waves are also affected by seasonal swell conditions. They are smaller from November to March and larger from April to October are larger, generally ranging from 2.5 to 3 metres at that time of year.¹⁴
21. The swell conditions can also change quickly and can sometimes large sets of waves will randomly roll through in periods that otherwise appear relatively calm. There was evidence at the inquest that "'The Spot' can be quite misleading"¹⁵ in that regard, and unless someone stood for a period on the beach and watched, it would not necessarily be apparent that these random sets are forming. Locals who travelled to the area in boats that day to assist with the search noted that there were, indeed, very large sets of waves coming through at random intervals on the day Mr Palkovics disappeared.¹⁶

¹⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 6.

¹¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 6.

¹² Exhibit 1, Tab 6.

¹³ Exhibit 1, Tab 1 and Tab 5.

¹⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 1.

¹⁵ T 25.

¹⁶ T 15; Exhibit 1, Tab 5.

22. Given the known timing of events, the evidence suggested Mr Palkovics would have arrived at 'The Spot' and entered the water quickly, so it is unlikely he would have had an opportunity to notice that the swell was unusual that day. Therefore, he might well have been taken by surprise by a set of unusually large waves coming in without warning.

DISCOVERY THAT MR PALKOVICS WAS MISSING

23. Mr Rik Soderlund was a Cocos Island resident at the time. He regularly surfed at 'The Spot' and knew the area well. He is also very experienced in marine sports and water activities. He knew Mr Palkovics at the time as a local resident, a skilled stand-up paddleboarder, and a kite surfer.¹⁷
24. On the morning of 22 July 2020, Mr Soderlund dropped his wife and children at the ferry terminal. He left home at about 7.10 am and the drive usually takes about 10 minutes. As he drove past 'The Spot', he saw Mr Palkovics' Nissan parked there. After dropping his family off, Mr Soderlund drove back past 'The Spot'. He estimated the time would have been around 7.30 am. Mr Soderlund had a clear view of 'The Spot' and he saw a red Stand-up paddleboard floating in the water, about midway between the beach and the breakers. He did not see any person on or near the board at that time but recognised the board as one used by Mr Palkovics.¹⁸
25. Mr Soderlund slowed down as he expected to see Mr Palkovics get back on his board, but this did not occur. Mr Soderlund continued to drive towards 'The Spot', losing sight of the water for a short time as his view was obstructed by vegetation. When he regained sight of the water, Mr Soderlund was surprised to see that Mr Palkovics still had not got back on his board. It was sufficiently unusual that Mr Soderlund decided to pull into the carpark next to Mr Palkovics car. There was no one else around at this time. Mr Soderlund walked to the top of the timber stairs and looked out at the water. Mr Soderlund could see the board about 50 metres to the south of the stairs, still midway between the beach and the breakers, but he did not see any sign of Mr Palkovics.¹⁹
26. Mr Soderlund explained in his evidence that he realised something must have happened, and his first thought was Mr Palkovics might have broken his leg rope and the board had washed in without him. He scanned the water to see if he could identify Mr Palkovics swimming back in towards his board, which does happen on occasion when the leg rope snaps. Mr Soderlund continued to scan the water looking for Mr Palkovics for a few minutes, concentrating on the area where the outflow travels. "As the minutes progressed with no sign of him, ...panic set in"²⁰ as Mr Soderlund realised something wasn't right.
27. After a short while, Mr Soderlund was joined by another local man, Ronald Shaw ('Mr Shaw'). Mr Shaw had ridden there on his bicycle and asked Mr Soderlund what was happening. Mr Soderlund explained that the board was Mr Palkovics' and he

¹⁷ T 27; Exhibit 1, Tab 5.

¹⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 5.

¹⁹ T 24 – 25; Exhibit 1, Tab 5.

²⁰ T 25.

thought Mr Palkovics was in the water. Both men scanned the water for any sign of Mr Palkovics. Mr Soderlund caught a glimpse of an item in the breakers about 100 metres south of the timber stairs. He told Mr Shaw he had seen something and pointed out in the direction of the item, which he thought could be Mr Palkovics.²¹

28. About 30 seconds later, another wave broke in the same area and Mr Soderlund saw more of the item which he suspected from what he saw was a body horizontal in the wave. Mr Shaw saw it too and swore out loud. Mr Soderlund knew Mr Shaw was more competent in the water than himself, so he asked Mr Shaw to get the rescue board out and go into the water to see if he could locate Mr Palkovics. Mr Soderlund went and raised the alarm. Mr Soderlund ran to his car and drove immediately to the West Island Medical Clinic at speed.²²
29. I note at this stage that there is very little mobile coverage on Cocos Island and so the only way for Mr Soderlund to quickly get help was to drive and make a report to someone. He chose to go to the clinic, rather than the police station, as he believed that Mr Palkovics would need medical help as a priority, if he was able to be located. Mr Soderlund advised the clinic's staff that he believed there was a body in the water at 'The Spot' and asked them to call the police. Mr Soderlund then returned to 'The Spot' to see if he could help with the search for Mr Palkovics.²³
30. When Mr Soderlund arrived back at the beach, he saw another local had arrived and she had joined Mr Shaw in the water. Mr Shaw was pushing in Mr Palkovics' board while paddling the rescue board, but there was no sign of Mr Palkovics. Mr Soderlund got into the water, swam out to Mr Shaw, and retrieved Mr Palkovics' board from him. He used the board to paddle back out towards the break to try to search for Mr Palkovics in the water. Mr Soderlund was unable to see anything that might be relevant and eventually paddled back to shore. Mr Soderlund placed Mr Palkovics' board on the sand.
31. A short time after returning to shore, Mr Soderlund was looking out into the water when he saw a paddle in the water about 10 metres north of the steps and a few metres back from the shore. He walked into the water to retrieve the paddle and saw it was a black carbon fibre paddle of the type used for stand-up paddle boarding. He then continued to go up and down the beach looking in the water for any sign of Mr Palkovics.²⁴ At this time, other people began to arrive in the area to commence a formal search.²⁵

THE SEARCH

32. AFP officers, who are stationed at the Cocos Island Police Station, were notified via a telephone call at 7.55 am from a person at the West Island Clinic that Mr Palkovics was missing. LSC Owens took the call. He recalled he was told that there was a body floating in the water at 'The Spot'. LSC Owens and Sergeant David Williams

²¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 5.

²² Exhibit 1, Tab 5.

²³ Exhibit 1, Tab 5.

²⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 5.

²⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 5.

(‘Sgt Williams’) immediately left the station and drove to ‘The Spot’. They travelled behind the ambulance that had just left the clinic.²⁶

33. When the two police officers arrived at ‘The Spot’, there were a number of people already present, including Mr Soderlund and staff from the clinic who had just arrived. LSC Owens recalled he looked out into the ocean and noted that the surf was rough with a lot of debris, such as palm fronds and coconuts, in the water. He could see no sign of Mr Palkovics.
34. Sgt Williams and Mr Soderlund had a conversation. Sgt Williams asked Mr Soderlund if he was one hundred per cent certain he had seen a body. Mr Soderlund said, “No, I can’t be one hundred per cent certain.”²⁷ At the inquest, Mr Soderlund said he could not be absolutely certain that he saw a body that day, but he said that he saw “something crest the back of a wave south of where you would normally be and [his] immediate reaction was that it was a body.”²⁸ Mr Soderlund gave evidence his heart sank at the time and his gut instinct was that he had seen Mr Palkovics’ body in the water, although he accepted that he could not say with absolute certainty. This is particularly so as Mr Shaw found a palm tree in the water at that location, although Mr Soderlund noted that what Mr Shaw found may not have been the same thing he saw in the water from a distance.²⁹
35. LSC Owens contacted another AFP officer on the radio and asked him to prepare the police vessel for a search, then used Sgt Williams’ mobile phone to contact further resources to assist in coordinating a search for Mr Palkovics. Another AFP officer arrived towing a jet ski between 8.10 and 8.15 am. The jet ski, as well as the police vessel were quickly utilised to start a search of the water, while someone else launched a drone into the air. Mr Soderlund went home to collect his own boat so it could also be used to assist the search.³⁰
36. When Ms Trinder arrived at ‘The Spot’ after finishing her chores, she observed several police cars parked there. Ms Trinder spoke to Sgt Williams and confirmed she was Mr Palkovics’ partner. Sgt Williams informed her that Mr Palkovics’ paddleboard had washed up and Mr Palkovics could not be found. She saw a red stand-up paddleboard and a paddle on the beach. Ms Trinder immediately recognised them as Mr Palkovics’. Ms Trinder stayed in the area briefly, before driving her car norther of ‘The Spot’ and then standing on the roof of her car to do her own search of the water.³¹
37. When looking out to sea, Ms Trinder noted that the tide was high, the waves were fat and closer together than usual, and the water was not clear. Ms Trinder walked up to a nearby restaurant located directly on the beach and they allowed her to use their balcony to look for Mr Palkovics. Ms Trinder looked to borrow some binoculars and a local rescue volunteer lend his to use for the day while walking along the beach.

²⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

²⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 5 [57].

²⁸ T 26.

²⁹ T 27.

³⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 and Tab 5.

³¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 6.

Ms Trinder moved positions up and down the beach, searching the sea from each location, but saw no sign of Mr Palkovics.³²

38. Ms Trinder eventually returned to 'The Spot'. She went and had a closer look at Mr Palkovics' paddleboard that had been recovered. She found nothing unusual about the board initially, but then her attention was drawn to the leg rope, which had been broken about 10 cm from where it was usually attached to the board.³³ Ms Trinder continued to search the water with binoculars for the rest of the day, but she did not observe anything that might have been related to Mr Palkovics.³⁴
39. The police coordinated an extensive search utilising as many people and assets as were available in a small community such as Cocos Island. LSC Owens noted they rely on the goodwill of the community to respond to such incidents, but in his experience, people will always drop everything to come, help, and do what they can to assist the police. That is what occurred in this case. The search continued throughout the first day and were stood down at 5.00 pm due to failing light. The search resumed at 7.30 am the next day and continued again until 5.00 pm. The search was suspended at 5.00 pm on 23 July 2020 as it was determined that there was no prospect of finding Mr Palkovics alive (based on advice from search and survival experts as to the time frame for survival) and the possible area where he might be found had been thoroughly searched so any further searching would be futile.³⁵
40. The total search involved the coordinated response of:³⁶
- 8 volunteer small crafts;
 - 3 personal watercrafts;
 - 6 domestic commercial vessels;
 - 3 aircrafts;
 - the ABF vessel *Ocean Protector*; and
 - 30 land and shore search volunteers.
41. LSC Owens noted that they were fortunate at the time that a Royal Australian Air Force aircraft was conducting border surveillance in the area. They were one of the aircraft utilised in the search and were able to conduct air patrols of the search area very quickly. This aircraft and along with two other aircrafts greatly assisted the extent of the search area covered.³⁷
42. A review of the search concluded there was a very high likelihood (in excess of 95%) that Mr Palkovics would have been found if he was on the surface of the water, so it was felt most likely that his body was submerged beneath the water during the search. The expert advice was also to the effect that if his body was submerged, then it was unlikely it would resurface and ever be found.³⁸

³² Exhibit 1, Tab 6.

³³ Exhibit 1, Tab 6.

³⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 6.

³⁵ T 13; Exhibit 1, Tab 14.

³⁶ T 16 - 17; Exhibit 1, Tab 14.

³⁷ T 17.

³⁸ T 13, 18; Exhibit 1, Tab 14.

POLICE INVESTIGATION INTO THE DISAPPEARANCE

43. Although it appeared to the local police that it was very likely Mr Palkovics had died suddenly in the water on 22 July 2020, they still conducted further investigations to confirm that Mr Palkovics had not made contact with any person or made any financial or other transactions or used government services after that date.³⁹
44. Ms O'Neill last spoke to Mr Palkovics on 15 July 2020, when he had a video chat with Oliver. He has made no contact with Ms O'Neill, or their son, since that time. Mr Palkovics had been paying regular child support to Ms O'Neill for Oliver. She received his last child support payment on 17 July 2020, which was a regular fortnightly payment.⁴⁰ He has also not been in contact with Ms Trinder, with whom he was in a de facto relationship at the time and who he was supposed to meet that morning at 'The Spot'.
45. Mr Palkovics' parents were both deceased at the time of his disappearance. He had one sibling, a sister named Silvia Buchegger, who lives in Austria. LSC Owens contacted Ms Buchegger on 27 July 2020 and she indicated that she was already aware by that time that her brother was missing. She provided some additional information to LSC Owens by email on a number of occasions, and confirmed she has had no contact with him since his disappearance.⁴¹
46. Mr Palkovics last saw his employer on Cocos Island, Mr Fowler, on a date before 7 July 2020. Mr Fowler then left Cocos Island for⁴² a holiday, with the understanding that Mr Palkovics would be managing the business in his absence. Mr Fowler had asked Mr Palkovics not to contact him unless it was urgent. He only became aware that Mr Palkovics was missing on 22 July 2020 when he received a message from another employee. Mr Fowler returned to Cocos Island on 28 July 2020.⁴³
47. Mr Fowler is a very experienced stand-up paddle boarder and kite surfer and he often lent his boards to Mr Palkovics. After he returned to Cocos Island he went to the police station to review the board that had been recovered. He recognised it as one of his boards that he had purchased in Fremantle. Mr Fowler noted that the string attached to the plug at the back of the board was snapped and he assumed the velcro part of the leg rope was snapped free. Mr Fowler informed police that the snapping of a stand-up paddleboard leg rope is not uncommon on Cocos Island due to the environment's effect on stored boards and the tidal and current conditions in the water. He would regularly replace the leg ropes on his boards due to wear and tear or snapping when in use. Mr Fowler noted that the board was otherwise intact and did not display any signs of damage.⁴⁴ Mr Fowler also told police that he had never seen Mr Palkovics stand-up paddleboard without a leg rope attached. When he first learned Mr Palkovics was missing at 'The Spot', he assumed that the board leg strap had snapped and he knew that Mr Palkovics was not a strong swimmer, so he was very worried about what had happened to him.⁴⁵

³⁹ T 20; Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 1 and Tab 4.

⁴¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴² Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴³ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

⁴⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

⁴⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

48. There was conflicting evidence in that regard as to how strong a swimmer Mr Palkovics was. There was a general consensus that he was a good waterman and would be generally able to get to safety, other than in extreme conditions or if something impaired his ability to do so. I am satisfied he was competent enough as a swimmer to usually get himself out of trouble if he fell off his board, and to swim into shore if he became separated from his board, in ordinary circumstances.
49. There was evidence that Mr Palkovics enjoyed engaging in challenging sports like stand-up paddleboarding on waves and kite surfing, but he was not considered to be reckless or an excessive risk taker when engaging in these sports. He did not usually wear a life jacket or flotation device when stand-up paddleboarding, but witnesses gave evidence that this was not unusual as they are very restrictive when engaging in this activity so it was not common for people to wear one and it is not mandated by law.⁴⁶
50. Mr Palkovics was generally very fit and healthy for his age but the police did obtain medical records that indicated Mr Palkovics had attended the emergency department at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in Perth on 16 March 2020, not long before he disappeared, with a complaint of palpitations and decreased sensation in his left arm. He said he had initially also experienced nausea, anxiety and light-headedness, which had subsided. Mr Palkovics also reported he had experienced a similar episode two days previously, which had subsided after about 10 minutes. Mr Palkovics was concerned that he might have experienced a stroke, which is why he had presented to hospital. He was medically assessed and found to show no evidence of a heart attack or stroke and the overall impression was of anxiety. However, the doctor recommended Mr Palkovics go see his GP if the symptoms persisted or return to the Emergency Department.⁴⁷
51. The conclusion of LSC Owens, who prepared the police report to the State Coroner, as well as other witnesses, was that Mr Palkovics either had a medical event or was injured and was rendered unconscious, while stand-up paddleboarding. During this incident his leg rope snapped and he became separated from his board and lost his paddle. The board and paddle are buoyant, so they floated in the water, but Mr Palkovics became submerged.⁴⁸

CONCLUSION

52. Mr Palkovics was last seen alive early on the morning of 22 July 2020. He disappeared while stand-up paddleboarding a short time later. Despite a comprehensive search being initiated shortly after Mr Palkovics came into difficulty in the water, his body has never been found. There was, however, a reliable potential sighting of his body in a wave, which suggests his body was washed out to sea.
53. I am satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that Mr Palkovics died on or about 22 July 2020. Given the known circumstances, there is a strong probability his death

⁴⁶ T 18, 37.

⁴⁷ T 21; Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴⁸ T 21, 31 – 32, 37.

was due to drowning, but there is insufficient evidence for me to be able to be satisfied to the requisite standard of a cause or manner of death. This is because I can't exclude that he had a sudden medical event that caused his death, was fatally injured in some way on the reefs in the area or potentially even came into contact with a marine predator, although I note the paddleboard was found intact other than the broken leg rope.

54. The cause of death must remain unascertained and the manner of death will be left open, as I cannot determine whether it arose due to natural causes or accident.
55. It might seem trite to say that Mr Palkovics died doing what he loved, but it is clear that he was passionate about water sports and had chosen a life revolving around the sea and taking some calculated risks to engage in the activities he loved. Unfortunately, something happened on this particular day that stopped him from being able to save himself and get back to shore.
56. I do not propose to make any recommendations arising from his death, as it seems to me that the local residents on Cocos Island are well aware of the risks involved in these sports, and they manage those risks as best they can and look out for each other whenever possible while still choosing to do what they love.



S H Linton
Deputy State Coroner
21 September 2022

