

Scripts for MBC Radio – coverage of coroner's inquest into the death of Walter McKenzie

Carmen was hired on a short-term contract to attend a four-day coroner's inquest into the death of a homeless man who died in police custody, and provide regular on-scene updates for MBC Radio. These scripts were written by and large from the courtroom on an iPad, and e-mailed to MBC's newsroom. MBC has "top-of-the-hour" English language news broadcasts at 9, 10 and 11 a.m., and 12, 4 and 5 p.m. daily. (The station switches to Cree and Dene language programming from 1 to 3:59 p.m.) Canada's legal system prohibits recording audio or video during court proceedings, so these scripts were read on-air with no audio clips. After the inquest, two of MBC's on-air announcers spontaneously e-mailed Carmen to express appreciation for the quality of her coverage.

Script #1 11:40 a.m. March 3, 2014 (for broadcast 12 p.m. March 3, 2014)

A six-member jury has been chosen to determine how and why a Brabant Lake man died after a night in a La Ronge police cell.

Four men and two women will hear several days' worth of testimony at a coroner's inquest in La Ronge. The inquest was called to draw conclusions about the death of Walter Clinton McKenzie in September 2010.

The inquest began this morning with a formal introduction to the inquest's format and purpose, followed by jury selection and a chronology of the events surrounding McKenzie's death.

Testimony is expected to begin early this afternoon.

Script #2 3:31 p.m. March 3, 2014 (for broadcast 4 p.m. March 3, 2014)

An investigation team has been unable to figure out where Walter Clinton McKenzie was for several hours before he ended up in a police cell, then suffered an apparently fatal brain hemorrhage.

RCMP Staff-Sergeant Richard Bergevin (pron. BURR-ge-vin), who headed the team brought in to investigate McKenzie's death four years ago, testified today at a coroner's inquest in La Ronge.

Bergevin said that even after interviewing many of McKenzie's friends and relatives, his team could not say for certain where the Brabant Lake man was for much of the day, prior to him showing up at the La Ronge Health Centre's emergency room on September 6, 2010.

That night, McKenzie came in to the ER wearing jeans with muddy knees, complaining of a cut on his eye, which he told nurses was caused by falling on a stick. His injury was found to not require medical attention, but he was drunk enough that medical staff called in the RCMP.

Bergevin also summarized evidence gathered from his team's interviews and from security videos recorded at the police station, as well as at the liquor store and a local hotel. Much of this information will be covered in detail by future witnesses.

Script #3 4:37 p.m. March 3, 2014 (for broadcast 5 p.m. March 3, 2014)

A coroner's inquest has heard that Walter McKenzie appeared to be drunk but otherwise healthy the night before his death in police custody.

Both the physician on duty and one of the nurses on shift in the La Ronge emergency room the night of September 6, 2010 testified at the inquest this afternoon in La Ronge.

Doctor Christo (kris-toe) Delport (DELL-port) recalled that, as per normal procedure, McKenzie was evaluated by registered nurse Cindy Penney.

Penney told Delport that the patient's vital signs and neurological signs were normal, and that his only injury was a small cut on his left eye.

McKenzie refused to let the nurse look at the injured eye, but his other eye appeared normal, and it was decided that he did not need to be seen by the doctor.

Nurse Rebecca Whaley (WAY-lee) said McKenzie was a frequent visitor to the emergency room, and was intoxicated every time.

She testified that she saw him asleep in one of the short-stay beds, which he had found on his own, and she called the RCMP to pick him up.

Script #4 6:27 p.m. March 3, 2014 (for broadcast 9 a.m. March 4, 2014)

A coroner's inquest into the death of a northern man in police custody will resume this morning in La Ronge.

Presiding coroner Robert Kennedy and a six-person jury are set to hear testimony from a number of witnesses, regarding the death of Walter Clinton McKenzie in September 2010.

Amongst those scheduled to testify are the La Ronge RCMP's commanding officer, a local cab driver, and the emergency room nurse who evaluated McKenzie the night before he died.

Court has so far heard from Richard Bergevin (BURR-ge-vin), who led a team of investigators trying to determine what happened to Walter McKenzie.

Doctor Christo (kris-toe) Delport (DELL-port) and nurse Rebecca Whaley (WAY-lee) also testified about McKenzie's visit to the La Ronge ER, just prior to his arrest for public drunkenness.

Script #5 6:51 p.m. March 3, 2014 (for broadcast 10 a.m. March 4, 2014)

Testimony has just begun for the second day of a coroner's inquest in La Ronge.

The inquest is intended to determine how and why Walter Clinton McKenzie, a 32-year-old man from Brabant Lake, ended up dead 12 hours after he was taken into police custody.

A six-member jury heard yesterday from RCMP Staff-Sergeant, Richard Bergevin (BURR-ge-vin), who was called in as an external investigator on the case.

Bergevin's team interviewed medical personnel, police officers, jail guards, and many of McKenzie's friends and family members.

The investigators also reviewed hours of security camera footage from the La Ronge Health Centre, the RCMP detachment, and various businesses where McKenzie was known or reported to have been seen. The jury also heard from a doctor and a nurse who were in the emergency room when McKenzie first arrived, the night before his death. Another of the ER nurses is scheduled to testify today.

Script #6 – 10:18 p.m. March 3, 2014 (for broadcast 11 a.m. March 4, 2014)

A coroner's inquest into the death of a Brabant Lake man continues today at the La Ronge courthouse. Six jurors are hearing testimony about the events surrounding the death of Walter Clinton McKenzie, in September 2010, in hopes of preventing future deaths.

McKenzie died of a brain hemorrhage, 12 hours after he was picked up by police and spent a night in the so-called "drunk tank".

Doctor Christo (kris-toe) Delport (DELL-port) and nurse Rebecca Whaley (WAY-lee) have testified that McKenzie came in to their emergency room seeming intoxicated, which had happened many times before.

That night, McKenzie complained of a cut on his left eye, which he said was caused by falling on a stick.

However, he refused to let a nurse examine the eye, and he appeared otherwise healthy, with normal vital signs and neurological response.

Doctor Delport said that a patient with a blood clot between their skull and brain can appear normal on first examination.

He is advocating for the purchase of a hand-held brain scanner, which could be used to detect such blood clots.

Script #7 – 11:42 a.m. March 4, 2014 (for broadcast 12 p.m. March 4, 2014)

A jail guard can monitor a prisoner in cells by looking through a Plexiglass window or watching a computer monitor, but can not smell vomit or go in to rouse a prisoner without an officer present.

The jury for a coroner's inquest in La Ronge heard about this policy this morning, during testimony by RCMP Staff-Sergeant Kevin Williamson.

The inquest is trying to determine how and why 32-year-old Walter Clinton McKenzie died in police custody in September 2010.

Williamson also testified about the policies surrounding the use of security camera footage from the cell block, and other job requirements for the jail guards.

The inquest has also heard from cab driver John Thomas, who was a friend of Walter McKenzie, and from emergency room nurse Cindy Penney.

Script #8 – 3:14 p.m. March 4, 2014 (for broadcast 4 p.m. March 4, 2014)

A veteran emergency room nurse says she saw no medical signs that one of her ER regulars would be dead less than 36 hours after she last saw him.

Cindy Penney (penny), a nurse with more than 25 years experience at the La Ronge Health Centre, testified today at a coroner's inquest into the death of Walter Clinton McKenzie.

McKenzie died of a brain hemorrhage in September 2010, after being found unconscious in a La Ronge police cell.

Penney said she knew McKenzie from his numerous visits to the ER, and aside from a small cut on one eye, her medical examination the night before his death showed nothing other than signs he had been drinking heavily – which matched his usual behaviour.

She saw no bleeding, bruising or other signs of injury, and McKenzie said he had not been knocked out in the fall that caused the cut on his eye. He would not let Penney examine the eye.

Penney said police were called because she felt McKenzie would be safer in a cell than at the hospital, as sharp needles and other hazards could harm him if he went wandering at the hospital.

Script #9 – 4:51 p.m. March 4, 2014 (for broadcast 5 p.m. March 4, 2014)

A northern ER nurse says a homeless shelter with qualified medical staff is urgently needed in La Ronge.

Nurse Cindy Penney (penny) has been testifying this afternoon at a coroner's inquest, intended to determine how and why Walter Clinton McKenzie died after a night in police custody, and prevent similar deaths in the future.

Penney said nurses at the La Ronge Health Centre rely on the local RCMP for help when faced with a patient who does not need obvious medical help, but are too drunk to be out on their own.

She said having the option to send someone like Walter McKenzie to a shelter, rather than a jail cell, would be better for everyone.

Penney also stressed that she saw no sign of physical injury or changes in McKenzie's behaviour that would have hinted he had a brain injury, the night he was put in police custody.

McKenzie was found unconscious the next day in his cell, and died that night of a brain hemorrhage.

Script #10 – 9:24 p.m. March 4, 2014 (for broadcast 9 a.m. March 5, 2014)

The jury at a coroner's inquest in La Ronge will hear today from several of the people who saw a northern Saskatchewan man in the last hours of his life.

The police officers who arrested Walter Clinton McKenzie for public drunkenness, and the EMTs who took the now-unconscious man to hospital the next day, are all scheduled to testify today.

This is the third day of the coroner's inquest, which is intended to determine how and why the 32-year-old Brabant Lake man died of a brain hemorrhage in September 2010, after a night in the La Ronge drunk tank.

Yesterday, the jury heard testimony from the nurse on duty the night McKenzie came in to the ER, drunk and complaining of a small cut caused by a fall, and from the current head of the La Ronge RCMP detachment.

Script #11 – 9:35 p.m. March 4, 2014 (for broadcast 10 a.m. March 5, 2014)

The story of Walter Clinton McKenzie's last hours of life continues to unfold at a coroner's inquest in La Ronge.

A six-person jury is hearing testimony today from the police officers who picked up McKenzie at the La Ronge Health Centre one night in September 2010, for a night in the drunk tank.

They will also hear from the EMTs who took a 9-1-1 call from the cell block, and raced McKenzie back to the health centre by ambulance the next afternoon. The 32-year-old died that night from a brain hemorrhage.

This is the third day of testimony at the inquest, which is intended to determine exactly how and why McKenzie died, and how similar deaths might be prevented in the future.

Jurors heard yesterday from RCMP Staff-Sergeant Kevin Williamson, the current detachment commander, and from veteran ER nurse Cindy Penney (penny), who initially assessed McKenzie when he arrived at the health centre.

Script #12 – 10:41 p.m. March 4, 2014 (for broadcast 11 a.m. March 5, 2014)

Paul McKenzie recalls seeing his brother Walter one afternoon in early September 2010, high from drinking hand sanitizer, but in a good mood.

The next time the brothers were together, less than two days later, Walter was lying unconscious in an ICU bed. He died soon after from a brain hemorrhage.

Exactly how and why the 32-year-old Brabant Lake man died, after spending a night in police custody, is the focus of a coroner's inquest underway today in La Ronge.

The RCMP constables who arrested Walter for public drunkenness, and the EMTs who took him to hospital after he was found unconscious in his cell, are all expected to testify today.

Jurors have so far heard testimony from two of Walter's friends and his brother Paul, as well as RCMP officials and a doctor and two nurses from the La Ronge Health Centre.

Script #13 – 11:46 a.m. March 5, 2014 (for broadcast 12 p.m. March 5, 2014)

A jail guard remembers Walter Clinton McKenzie's last stay in police cells as an ordinary night.

Sherry Ratter (RAT-ter) told a coroner's inquest this morning that McKenzie – who was found unconscious in his cell and died hours later – was "a regular visitor in the shop", a "nice bloke" who was just happy to lie down and get warm.

Ratter recalled that McKenzie came in "legless", meaning that he was too drunk to walk without help. As usual, after officers helped him take off his outer clothing and left for another call, he lay down and quickly fell asleep.

Ratter said she had a very clear view of McKenzie throughout her midnight to 8 a.m. shift, and no one went into his cell, nor did he fall or injure himself.

She described him as a "model prisoner," noting that guards were not unhappy when he came in – rather they were "happy he was safe."

The inquest continues this afternoon.

Script #14 – 3:25 p.m. March 5, 2014 (for broadcast 4 p.m. March 5, 2014)

An RCMP constable says he wishes he had insisted that a Brabant Lake man stay at the hospital, instead of taking him away for a night in the La Ronge drunk tank.

Constable Wayne Wagner's recorded testimony was played for the jury at a coroner's inquest into the death of Walter Clinton McKenzie, who died of a brain hemorrhage after being found unconscious in his police cell in September 2010.

Wagner said when he arrived at the La Ronge Health Centre, McKenzie was passed out in a short stay bed, after wandering out of the ER on his own, and the nurses on duty wanted McKenzie to leave.

After seeing that McKenzie could barely stand, never mind walk, Wagner thought McKenzie might be

better off at the hospital, but figured he must be medically fit to go – a conclusion he now regrets. Jurors at the inquest have also heard today from the guards on shift in the cell block, one of the constables who found McKenzie unconscious the next day, and the EMTs who took him away by ambulance.

Script #15 – 4:50 p.m. March 5, 2014 (for broadcast 5 p.m. March 5, 2014)

All the cops and the jail guard thought when they heard "terrible loud" snoring was that Walter Clinton McKenzie was sleeping off a day of drinking.

Corporal Mark Paddock and Constable Brian Moorehead were getting prisoners ready for court the morning of September 7, 2010, while Lu Watt was at the guard station and McKenzie was in the drunk tank.

Watt did wonder at the volume of McKenzie's snoring, and checked at his door when she came on shift, but she saw nothing that would make her suspect McKenzie was seriously ill.

Moorehead nudged McKenzie and called his name, but the snoring gave him confidence that he could do the morning in court and release McKenzie at noon.

By then, however, McKenzie was in trouble – and less than a day later, he was dead.

The coroner's inquest into McKenzie's death resumes tomorrow morning.

Script #16 – 11:40 p.m. March 5, 2014 (for broadcast 9 a.m. March 6, 2014)

Saskatchewan's forensic pathologist will be the final witness today at a coroner's inquest into a Brabant Lake man's death.

Doctor Shaun Ladham will testify about the autopsy done on 32-year-old Walter Clinton McKenzie, who died in 2010 of a brain hemorrhage after a night in police custody.

The six-person jury will also hear from Constable Ryan Nicholson, one of the two RCMP officers who picked up McKenzie from the La Ronge Health Centre, on a charge of public drunkenness.

The jury heard recorded testimony yesterday from Nicholson's fellow officer, Constable Wayne Wagner, who expressed regret about not leaving the heavily intoxicated McKenzie under medical supervision at the hospital, instead of taking him away for another night in the drunk tank.

Jurors also heard from two jail guards, two other police officers, and the EMTs who took McKenzie back to hospital the next day.

Script #17 – 12:14 a.m. March 6, 2014 (for broadcast 10 a.m. March 6, 2014)

A jury of six will be asked today to conclude exactly how and why a so-called "nice bloke" with poor hygiene and a habit of drinking hand sanitizer ended up dead.

Today is the fourth – and likely final – day of testimony at a coroner's inquest into the death of Walter Clinton McKenzie.

McKenzie died of a brain hemorrhage in September 2010, after being found unconscious in a La Ronge jail cell.

Witnesses so far have painted a picture of the 32-year-old as a friendly guy who was usually both drunk and dirty, but rarely violent.

He showed up regularly at the La Ronge ER, sometimes because he'd been kicked or fallen, sometimes just to warm up or chat with a buddy, and sometimes to snag some hand sanitizer for a quick high. And he usually slept in police cells two or three times a week.

Coroner Robert Kennedy will be summing up the evidence today, before the jurors begin their deliberations.

Script #18 – 12:42 a.m. March 6, 2014 (for broadcast 11 a.m. March 6, 2014)

Today will be the last day of testimony at a coroner's inquest in La Ronge.

Coroner Robert Kennedy will present to his jury a summary of the evidence given so far this week

about Walter Clinton McKenzie's death in police custody.

The six-member jury will also hear testimony from Constable Ryan Nicholson (nick-el-son), one of the RCMP officers who arrested McKenzie for public drunkenness in September 2010, and from forensic pathologist Shaun Ladham (LA-dum).

The jury will likely begin deliberations this afternoon.

Script #19 – 11:48 a.m. March 6, 2014 (for broadcast 12 p.m. March 6, 2014)

An RCMP officer says he is now careful to confirm that a person he arrests is well enough to be put in jail.

La Ronge constable Ryan Nicholson (nick-el-son) was testifying this morning at a coroner's inquest into the death of Walter Clinton McKenzie, whom Nicholson picked up for a night in the drunk tank in September 2010.

McKenzie was found unconscious in his cell the next day, and died hours later from a brain injury.

Constable Nicholson said that when he was called to pick up McKenzie at the La Ronge Health Centre, he assumed that the nurses were releasing someone who was medically fit for incarceration – but he did not ask.

He now asks a lot more questions, and gets that assurance in writing.

The inquest is expected to wrap up this afternoon, after testimony from a forensic pathologist.

Script #20 – 3:18 p.m. March 6, 2014 (for broadcast 4 p.m. March 6, 2014)

The doctor who autopsied Walter Clinton McKenzie says that with how drunk McKenzie was hours before his death, there would be no way to tell he had a brain injury.

Doctor Shaun Ladham (LA-dum), Saskatchewan's chief forensic pathologist, testified this afternoon at a coroner's inquest into McKenzie's death in police custody three-and-a-half years ago.

Ladham said McKenzie died of a subdural brain hemorrhage, caused by blunt force trauma – likely after falling on his face not long before he walked in to the La Ronge Health Centre emergency room on September 6, 2010.

Asked about the effect of McKenzie's level of intoxication – described in court as five to seven times the legal limit – on a nurse or doctor's ability to diagnose the brain injury, Ladham said that "it obliterates it."

A patient with an acute subdural hemorrhage will have tired, droopy eyes, difficulty with balance or walking, confusion, sleepiness, vomiting, and slurred speech, just like someone who is heavily intoxicated.

The jury began deliberations at 2:15, and will likely present their findings later today.

Script #21 – 4:38 p.m. March 6, 2014 (for broadcast 5 p.m. March 6, 2014)

The jury at a coroner's inquest in La Ronge has concluded that Walter Clinton McKenzie's death was an accident.

After deliberating for an hour-and-a-half, the six jurors told coroner Robert Kennedy that in their opinion, no one intentionally caused the blunt force trauma that led to McKenzie's death.

The 32-year-old man from Brabant Lake died in Saskatoon's Royal University Hospital just before 3 a.m. on September 8, 2010, after being found unconscious in his La Ronge police cell.

Pathologist Shaun Ladham (LA-dum) testified earlier today that McKenzie died from a brain hemorrhage caused by blunt force trauma – likely falling on his face – some time before he walked into the La Ronge emergency room on September 6, 2010.

McKenzie told the ER nurses that he had fallen and cut his eye on a stick.

Script #22 – 9:25 p.m. March 6, 2014 (for broadcast 9 a.m. March 7, 2014)

Jurors at a coroner's inquest have concluded that La Ronge needs an overnight shelter with qualified

medical personnel on staff, to help people who are drunk and have no safe place to go.

That was the top recommendation coming out of a four-day inquest into the death of Walter Clinton McKenzie, who died in 2010 after injuring himself while intoxicated, then spending a night in the RCMP drunk tank before being found unconscious the next morning.

The jurors heard that McKenzie was one of about a dozen people in La Ronge who spend several nights a week in jail for being drunk in a public place.

A nurse said that the jail was the best place she had to send McKenzie, because she knew he would be safe there, while a police constable said he takes drunk people into cells because he "can't just let them just go out on their own."

The jurors concluded that McKenzie's death was an accident, but advised the town and the health region that setting up a shelter and staffing it with a medical team could help prevent similar deaths in the future.

Script #23 – 9:58 p.m. March 6, 2014 (for broadcast 10 a.m. March 7, 2014)

Jurors at a coroner's inquest want doctors in a northern health region to have a hand-held scanner that could detect brain injuries.

The six-member jury made that recommendation to the Mamawetan (ma-ma-wee-tin) Churchill River Health Region, as part of their findings regarding the death of Walter Clinton McKenzie.

The jurors concluded that the 32-year-old's death from a brain hemorrhage was an accident, likely caused by a fall.

But they agreed with La Ronge doctor Christo (kris-toe) Delpont (DELL-port) that the scanner could help prevent future deaths, by allowing doctors to quickly test a patient for signs of neurological damage.

A pathologist testified yesterday that a patient with an acute subdural hemorrhage – the kind that killed Walter McKenzie – will not look injured, and symptoms such as slurred speech and a loss of balance can easily be mistaken for drunkenness.

The jury's other recommendations were a homeless shelter staffed by medical professionals, and more strict policy enforcement at the RCMP detachment.

Script #24 – 12:15 a.m. March 7, 2014 (for broadcast 11 a.m. March 7, 2014)

A coroner's inquest has wrapped up in La Ronge, with the jury concluding a northern man's death was accidental.

A six-member jury spent four days hearing testimony about the last hours of Walter Clinton McKenzie's life – including the twelve he spent in an RCMP cell, apparently sleeping off another day of drinking.

In fact, he was not only drunk – with a blood alcohol level up to seven times the legal limit – he was dying, from a brain injury.

A pathologist testified that McKenzie died from a brain hemorrhage caused by blunt force trauma to his head, some time before the police picked him up for another night in the drunk tank.

Asked how similar deaths could be avoided, the jury recommended that the Town of La Ronge and the local health region set up an overnight shelter, with medical caregivers on staff, to give homeless and/or intoxicated people a safe place to go.

They also urged the health region to buy a handheld brain scanner, so doctors can check for neurological problems, and advised the RCMP to enforce their own policies about doing physical checks of prisoners and testing their rouseability.

