

Deadly act of domestic violence sparks calls for police to be more open

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Jennifer Quesnel.
Photograph By VIA GOFUNDME

Police secrecy surrounding domestic-violence murder investigations needs to change, says an expert in intimate partner violence, following the murder of a Salt Spring mother of three by her husband, who subsequently killed himself.

Tracy Porteous, executive director of the Ending Violence Association of B.C., says more information needs to be revealed in the immediate aftermath of such killings to highlight the issue of domestic violence and educate the public about risk factors.

“Closing the doors after such a huge tragedy serves no one,” Porteous said. “It dishonours the family. It dishonours the woman that was killed. And it also misses a critical opportunity to publicly educate other people who might have other loved ones with the same dynamics unfolding. To keep all this information top secret, I don’t know what that serves.”

On June 1, Jennifer Quesnel, 41, who was leaving her husband after 18 years of marriage, returned to the family property to pick up items and tend to her horse. Husband John Quesnel, 48, who had agreed previously to be elsewhere, was hiding in the bushes on their property and ambushed her, shooting her in “cold blood” before killing himself, said family. Their three children, ages 12 to 17, were not at home at the time of the killing.

The next day, the police would reveal only that two people on Salt Spring Island had died, that the public was not at risk and that there were no suspects or charges pending.

B.C. RCMP spokesman Chris Manseau said those are code words that typically indicate a suicide — which police will not confirm or speak to publicly — or in this case, a murder-suicide.

Family members were left to fill in the details for the public.

Police did not say they were investigating a murder-suicide until Monday, a week after the killing. Then on Wednesday, the RCMP and B.C. Coroners Service went further, acknowledging that the deaths involved intimate-partner violence and saying there was no previous history of reports of such violence to the RCMP.

Work continues on the investigation that cannot yet be disclosed to the public, Manseau said. “There may come a time when further information could come forward, but for the integrity of this investigation, there will be no further updates.”

Porteous questioned who it serves “to keep all of this information kind of top secret,” noting both of those involved are dead.

She wondered who is asking for confidentiality in intimate-partner murder-suicide cases.

While police frequently say it’s not in the public interest to release any information about murder-suicides, that’s not true, Porteous said. “I think it’s entirely in the public interest to understand what led up to her death. Had she reported to the police in the past? Had she asked for police accompaniment that had been turned down? Had anybody done a risk assessment? Had anybody noticed or had she told anybody that she felt like she was at risk and had she ever said that to the police? And if she ever said that to the police, where is the risk assessment?”

There are strong indicators in domestic violence of situations that could turn lethal, Porteous said — everything from previous domestic abuse to employment instability, mental illness, access to firearms, custody battles and escalation of abuse.

Leaving an abusive partner is considered one of the highest-risk situations — something Jennifer Quesnel was in the process of doing. “She already had concerns about her safety,” Porteous said.

She said shining a light on risk factors might help others see potential domestic abuse in their own circles and prevent similar tragedies. Many studies have shown that women often underestimate the danger that they are in when it comes to domestic violence, she said.

John Quesnel, who owned Salt Spring Metal Recycling, was having financial problems. He was also potentially losing his business location, a situation exacerbated by thefts on the grounds of his scrap yard.

The fact he was losing his partner, along with possible sources of income, could represent an escalation of risk factors, Porteous said.

Brother-in-law Jason Fraser and the couple’s son John Quesnel Jr. told the Times Colonist last week that John Quesnel was “terribly” verbally abusive. “It was never anything like physical, like him actually hitting her or anything like that,” John Quesnel Jr. said. “It was yelling ... and that’s about as bad as it got, really.”

No one imagined he would murder his wife, Fraser said last week. “No one did,” he said. “We thought he was moving on like normal people do when they go through divorce.” The two said Jennifer Quesnel did not fear for her life.

The family said in a statement that Quesnel was bullying and controlling. He also had firearms, guns the family said were recently confiscated because he didn’t have a licence for them. The RCMP were not able to explain this week how or why the firearms came to be confiscated. The family said Quesnel purchased the murder weapon from a friend, something police are also investigating.

Jennifer Quesnel raised the issue of divorce about a month ago, and went to live with her brother in Sidney about a week or two before her death, said John Quesnel Jr.

Fraser and John Quesnel Jr. confirmed that Jennifer Quesnel had talked to Sidney-North Saanich RCMP about a possible police escort to her family home when she went the day she was killed.

Fraser and John Quesnel Jr. confirmed that Jennifer Quesnel had talked to Sidney-North Saanich RCMP about the police possibly accompanying her to her family home. “Jennifer had also spoken to the RCMP about an escort to the property but later felt he wouldn’t be a threat,” said a statement from the family.

Manseau said the Mounties can’t find a file or record of a visit, formal complaint or request from Jennifer Quesnel.

If she called with a general inquiry, that likely wouldn’t generate a file, but, for example, if she reported domestic violence or said she was fearful and her husband had guns, that likely would have triggered a file and follow-up, Manseau said. “I know there’s a lot of a lot of questions here that we, too, are also investigating to see who she spoke to and what was said to her.”

Porteous said that if Jennifer Quesnel phoned police with a concern about her safety in leaving a relationship, police wouldn’t have the discretion to view it as anything but a domestic-violence call.

The B.C. Coroners Service, which aims to improve public safety and prevent death in similar circumstances, says it is investigating but would not provide any specific details about that probe.

In a plane crash, a number of investigations are brought in from around the country to investigate and make transparent to all involved all the reasons why there was a fatality, Porteous said.

“But when it comes to the lives of women and domestic violence, why are we not doing everything we can to make sure we are all equipped with the information we need to prevent an identical tragedy?”

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How to get help

If you or someone you know is being abused, or if you are concerned about someone’s safety, contact VictimLink B.C. Its confidential toll-free telephone service is available in several languages, 24 hours a day. VictimLink can be reached at 1-800-563-0808 or VictimLinkBC@bc211.ca

By the numbers

According to the B.C. Coroners Service, from 2010 to 2015, an average of 12 people died each year in B.C. as a result of injuries sustained from an intimate partner, and an average of 232 women were admitted to a B.C. hospital each year for severe injuries.

Every year, more than 13,000 people in B.C. seek police assistance to stop physical or emotional abuse at the hands of a current or former spouse or dating partner, 30,000 women and children are referred to counselling and programs and more than 18,000 women and children access transition and safe houses.

Over six years to December 2015, there were 75 fatal intimate partner violence incidents in B.C. that resulted in 100 deaths — 73 victims and 27 perpetrators, according to the death panel that reviewed these cases.

According to a B.C. Coroners Service report on intimate partner violence, from 2004 to 2014, three quarters of homicide victims were female.

Know the risk factors

The 19 risk factors of domestic violence as compiled by the B.C. Coroners Service:

Suspect's criminal violence history, previous domestic abuse, court orders, alcohol or drug abuse, employment instability resulting or financial problems, mental illness, threats of suicide, threats or use of weapons on partner or family, access to firearms.

Complainant's perception of safety, complainant's fear of future violence, current relationship status, escalation of abuse, the exposure of children including possible custody battles, threats, forced sex, past violence including choking or biting, jealousy behaviours including stalking or harassing, feelings of powerlessness because of family pressures, religion or gender inequality.

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