

Australia: 95-year-old Clare Nowland dies after police tasing

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Clare Nowland died on Wednesday evening, a week after police tasered her in an aged-care home in Cooma, New South Wales (NSW). The 95-year-old great-grandmother had been in and out of consciousness in hospital since she suffered a fractured skull and bleeding on the brain as a result of being tasered.

Born in 1928, Nowland lived through the Great Depression, World War II and more than three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed more than 20,000 people in Australia, according to official figures, including more than 5,500 aged care residents.

But her near-century of life was ended by police in what Kylie Paske, one of Nowland's 24 grandchildren, described as "unfathomable" circumstances. Paske remembered her grandmother as a "selfless" woman who "served the community" and had "love for everyone, she didn't judge."

NSW Police, in a stark expression of its callous attitude, noted on Facebook that Nowland had "passed away peacefully in hospital just after 7pm this evening." While the post has not been removed, the ability to post comments has been blocked, likely in an attempt to shut down anger and criticism.

The bland statement is all the more shocking after the public outcry over a police media release on the day of the tasing of the dementia patient, declaring "an elderly woman sustained injuries during an interaction with police."

However, "peaceful" her final moments in hospital may have been, Nowland's death was a direct result of her being shot with barbed taser darts and receiving an electric shock at the hands of police.

Earlier on Wednesday, Senior Constable Kristian White was ordered to appear in court on July 5. He is charged with recklessly causing grievous bodily harm, assault occasioning actual bodily harm and common

assault. NSW Police Commissioner Karen Webb said the charges may be upgraded in the wake of Nowland's death, but "it depends on what happens."

White is currently suspended from duty, but still receiving full pay.

The incident was recorded on cameras worn by the police. This footage has not been made public, with the NSW Labor government on Wednesday defeating a parliamentary motion calling for its release. But media reports have begun to surface revealing some details of what is contained in the video.

According to the *Daily Telegraph*, Nowland was sitting in a chair, alone in a room, when police and paramedics arrived at the doorway. The footage allegedly shows that White was wearing slash-resistant gloves when the 43-kilogram, 1.6-metre woman stood up "as if in slow motion" and began moving toward the police with the aid of a walking frame. She was holding a small, serrated steak knife, apparently taken from the facility's kitchen.

White's female partner, an acting sergeant, reportedly said "I can take it off her," but White said, "No, bugger it," before shooting Nowland with his taser.

The *Daily Telegraph* alleges this all unfolded in less than one minute. This is reminiscent of the police killing of Courtney Topic in 2015, when the young woman with mental health issues was shot dead just 41 seconds after officers arrived on the scene.

That was just one among numerous incidents over recent years of police violence against people with mental illnesses and other marginalised communities.

In the most recent example, on Thursday morning, 41-year-old Steve Pampalian was shot dead by police in Willoughby on Sydney's North Shore. The man, who suffered from anxiety and depression, but had no

history of violent episodes, was seen shirtless in the street, carrying two “chef-style” knives. Pampalian’s brother said police told the family there is no footage of the shooting because officers’ body-worn cameras were not switched on.

In several statements to the media, police chief Webb sought to divert blame for Nowland’s death away from police. She said on the “Today” show, “We don’t know why the aged care facility called police in the first place,” and told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, “It’s not a police officer’s core business, but we’ve been called there.”

Webb said she had “called for a review of all mental health training.” But countless previous reviews, inquiries and inquests into police killings and assaults against people with mental illness have done nothing to reverse the trend.

NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns said on Thursday: “I take on board what the police commissioner has said and I know that resources are stretched, particularly for NSW Police.” Such apologetics underscore the likelihood of a government-police coverup.

The safety of the mentally-ill and other vulnerable people will not be improved by making more resources available to the police, the heavily-armed machinery of state oppression. Nor will it reverse decades of cuts to funding for mental health, aged care and other vital social services has led to the increased use of police in circumstances that require compassion, sensitivity and specialist training.

According to the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, in 2022, police were deployed 20,738 times to “convey/detain” people to mental health facilities, 9.1 percent more than the previous year and almost 40 percent more than in 2018.

Nearly half the 157 reported “critical incident investigations” into police conduct resulting in death or serious injury between July 2017 and June 2022 involved people with mental illness.

The Law Enforcement Conduct Commission, which ostensibly oversees this process, released a report on Monday revealing that its monitoring is essentially a sham, as the police force remains permitted to investigate itself. These internal “investigations” are dragged out for an average of almost two years, if they are completed at all.

Lawyer Peter O’Brien told the *Sydney Morning*

Herald this was “a thoroughly ineffective, unaccountable and unsound means of keeping the police accountable.” More often than not, O’Brien said, “the police are left to investigate themselves under their own purview.”

This virtually lawless operation of the police has been fostered by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments. This was reflected in Minns’ attempt to quell public anger over the taser attack on Nowland by urging people to have confidence in the police investigation.

The alleged actions of Senior Constable White on May 17 cannot be dismissed as the wrongdoing of an individual “bad apple.” As the continuing record of police killings shows, the tasing of Clare Nowland is part of a systemic pattern of police violence. Whatever the outcome, any legal proceedings against White will do nothing to prevent future police attacks on the most vulnerable members of society, including those with dementia or other mental illness.

The death of Nowland is a particularly shocking expression of the role of the police as an instrument of capitalist rule, enforcing deteriorating social conditions. The victims of police violence have so far been predominantly among those suffering disability or ill health. But such state-sanctioned brutality sets precedents. Increasingly the violence will be directed against unrest in the working class as opposition grows to intolerable living conditions.



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