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### Jurors address jail space

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A coroner's jury has ruled that a District Jail inmate's death was an accident caused by a lethal amount of methadone.

The jury heard evidence over three days about the overdose death of Jacy Pierre, 27, in Cell 4, Block 2, on Oct. 27, 2007.

Coroner's juries determine how a death occurred, and often make recommendations about how to prevent similar deaths in the future.

After about two hours of deliberation on Wednesday, the five-person jury recommended the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services increase the number of segregation cells at the jail, where inmates are awaiting trial or sentence.

They also asked the ministry in charge of the remand facility to consider building a larger centre to address overcrowding, social programs and recreation availability.

On Tuesday, a shift supervisor testified about his role the day after Pierre's death, and he came armed with his own list of recommendations, which included more segregation cells.

Much of the inquest's testimony revolved around how illegal drugs are smuggled into and around the jail, and the challenge those techniques pose for the correctional officers.

Pierre, who traded some of his contraband tobacco with another inmate for methadone, wasn't the only inmate in the cell block to overdose that day. Another man was also taken to hospital after taking too much of the synthetic opiate. He survived.

Operational manager Robert McKenzie said the facility is constantly short of proper segregation units.

In the regular cell blocks, there are one or two inmates to a cell, which has bars for walls. Seven to nine cells open onto a small common living area with a meal table and television.

In Cell Block 1, which McKenzie called the facility's special handling unit, three cells – isolation cells – are encased in Plexiglas to prevent inmates from passing items through the bars. Inmates on suicide watch, those being punished for misconduct and those suspected of carrying drugs spend time in the special block.

But with not enough segregation and isolation space, there is constant pressure to move inmates back into the regular ranges, McKenzie said.

If there had been enough segregation space, he said, the inmate who sold the drugs to Pierre wouldn't have been moved to Cell Block 2.

Shawn Haigh, a former inmate who testified from a federal penitentiary that he took methadone from another inmate's cell and pockets when that man overdosed the week before, said he hid the drugs in his rectum.

Multiple witnesses said it's the routine method for prisoners to bring drugs into the prison and to hide them from guards, who no longer do body cavity searches.

Another senior corrections officer said inmates carry drugs in their rectums "because that's the one place you can't search."

Haigh was put in an isolation cell after being suspected of having illegal drugs, but the space was needed for someone else, McKenzie testified, so Haigh was moved to the same block as Pierre.

The jury also recommended the District Jail develop and implement a training program to familiarize staff with the symptoms of drug abuse.

The final recommendation was aimed at the jail clinic, suggesting that nursing staff administering medications accept only a verbal and visual refusal from an inmate.

The nurse working the day Pierre died told the jury that when she did her morning rounds to hand out medications to those inmates with prescriptions, another inmate told her Pierre was sleeping and she continued on her way.

In the same time period, inmates had told Haigh that Pierre was passed out. Haigh, who was locked in his cell as punishment, asked them to check on the young man. Pierre at that time told his fellow inmates he was fine and was simply resting.

Inmates found him unresponsive at about 12:45 p.m.

The nurse testified that since then, she spends more time and effort to have an inmate tell her himself whether he wants his medication. They have the right to refuse, but she wants to hear it from them, she said.