



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Winnipeg, MB

Day 2

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EVIDENCE

Witness 9: Michelle Kucher

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[00:00:00]

Shawn Buckley

So our next witness is going to be Michelle Kucher, who is going to be attending virtually.

Alexander MacKenzie

Again, for the Commission's records, my name is Alexander MacKenzie. And Michelle—Sandy MacKenzie—we have spoken on the phone.

Michelle Kucher

Correct.

Alexander MacKenzie

You can hear me clearly and I can hear you.

Michelle Kucher

Yes, I can.

Alexander MacKenzie

Michelle, I wonder if you would give your full name to the Commission, and perhaps, spell it.

Michelle Kucher

My full name is Michelle Kucher, K-U-C-H-E-R.

Alexander MacKenzie

Thank you.

Michelle, do you promise that the testimony you are about to give to this Commission shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Michelle Kucher

I do.

Alexander MacKenzie

Thank you.

Now, Michelle, you're testifying virtually from somewhere in the United States, is that correct?

Michelle Kucher

Correct.

Alexander MacKenzie

Thank you. And you reside in Matlock, Manitoba.

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

And that is a small town on the edge of Lake Winnipeg, about a one-half hour drive from the north end of Winnipeg, is that right?

Michelle Kucher

Approximately, yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

And Michelle, both your father and your mother are now deceased, that is correct?

Michelle Kucher

That's correct.

Alexander MacKenzie

Yeah, your father passed away in 2010.

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

And your mother, when did she pass?

Michelle Kucher

My mother passed away January 10th, 2022.

Alexander MacKenzie

You were close to both your mom and your dad?

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

And what was your mother's name?

Michelle Kucher

Mildred Kucher.

Alexander MacKenzie

Thank you.

Now, following your dad's death in 2010, your mother lived alone in Garden City. Is that correct?

Michelle Kucher

Yes. Technically, it was the last street of the north end, but it was in the Garden City area.

Alexander MacKenzie

In the Garden City area and that, again, is about a one-half hour drive from Winnipeg.

Michelle Kucher

From Winnipeg Beach? Yeah.

Alexander MacKenzie

Which is very near Matlock, where you lived.

Michelle Kucher

Yes. Where I lived, yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

And what was the condition of your mother's health starting in 2010 through to early 2020?

Michelle Kucher

My mother was a fiercely independent woman. She was extremely active. She belonged to many, many organizations. She managed to stay in her own home, even after my father passed away. She drove her own car until she was 91 years old. She went to—

Alexander MacKenzie

What year would that have been?

Michelle Kucher

When she was 91?

Alexander MacKenzie

Right, that she was 91.

Michelle Kucher

I have to do math.

Alexander MacKenzie

She turned 95, I understand, on October 9th, 2021.

Michelle Kucher

2021, yes, that's correct.

Alexander MacKenzie

So she would have been 91, four years earlier than that.

Michelle Kucher

Correct. Thank you.

Alexander MacKenzie

And that's good enough. Thank you.

Now her health was good then, is that fair to say?

Michelle Kucher

It was good considering she was the age she was. She had, like, cognitively, she was a 100 per cent. She had some issues walking because she had arthritis in her knees. Other than

that, she was very active; she attended two different day programs during the week, so that's three days a week she was out of the house—

Alexander MacKenzie

I'll get to that in a moment, okay?

Michelle Kucher

Okay.

Alexander MacKenzie

Thank you very much.

Now at the beginning of 2020, you were employed in two different jobs. Is that correct?

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

And what were those jobs?

Michelle Kucher

I held a full-time position at Selkirk Mental Health Centre in the Acquired Brain Injury Unit, as a psychiatric nursing assistant, and I held a part-time job at Selkirk Regional District Hospital in the day surgery,

[00:05:00]

as a health care aide.

Alexander MacKenzie

Were either you or your mother vaccinated for COVID?

Michelle Kucher

Eventually, yes. Not at the beginning of 2020; COVID hadn't really hit us yet.

Alexander MacKenzie

When would you—

Michelle Kucher

We did get vaccinated. I believe it would have been May of 2020 [sic].

Alexander MacKenzie

And you, personally, didn't like vaccinations, is that correct?

Michelle Kucher

That's correct.

Alexander MacKenzie

But you chose to get a vaccination so that you would fit in with all of the things that were required of you, is that fair to put it?

Michelle Kucher

That's a fair statement, yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

And so in early 2020, you had become concerned about the possibility of your transmitting COVID to your mother who was aging.

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

Okay, and how did you deal with that concern, in terms of your employment?

Michelle Kucher

In February of 2020, I moved in with my mother to be her primary caregiver. I would return to her house from work and I would immediately shower and throw my clothes in the washing machine. And I'd always have a change of clothes in the shower in the basement just in case there was any remnants of any kind of virus lingering on my clothing. And then, you know, every night after work, that's what I would do.

Alexander MacKenzie

Right, and again, I'm not sure if it was absolutely clear, but you had been living in Matlock, but you then took up residence in your mother's basement.

Michelle Kucher

Yes. So she had a brief hospital stay and was released from the hospital in January of 2020, and I moved in with her February of 2020, so she could remain in her own home and be safe.

Alexander MacKenzie

And when you say you became her primary caregiver, that's a formal name, is it not?

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

Yes. And what did that mean for you and your mother, you living in her basement as her primary caregiver? What other arrangements were you able to make?

Michelle Kucher

Well, we used the Self and Family-Managed Care option of the home care services in Winnipeg. It was through Winnipeg Regional Health Authority. Essentially, I became the manager of my mother's home care and did the payroll, scheduling of employees, hiring, firing, things like that. And I employed two health care aides to take care of my mother while I was at work.

And so my mother was entitled to, and assessed to need, 55 hours of care a week, which is, essentially, the maximum allowable through home care. I managed to get all my shifts to be evening shifts, so the two health care aides that I hired would work during the day and I'd come home from work in the evening— Sorry, I stayed with my mother during the day and the health care aides would work in the evening while I worked, and then I'd wake up the next day and do it all over again.

Alexander MacKenzie

Now, at some point, you did quit your job at the Selkirk Hospital, is that correct?

Michelle Kucher

I took advantage of a leave of absence. As a government employee, I was entitled to take a leave of absence to care for a family member, and so, I took advantage of that opportunity and I stayed home. I stayed with my mom.

Alexander MacKenzie

And you also— You had been working two jobs. You took a leave of absence from the other, as well, is that correct? From the Selkirk Mental Health Centre.

Michelle Kucher

Yes, and the Selkirk Hospital. Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

From both. And had you ever discussed with your mother the possibility of her living in a care home?

Michelle Kucher

It came up on occasion, especially when she was being assessed by her case managers. She was never, ever deemed unfit or would qualify for a personal care home because she was too high functioning cognitively. Assisted living: She was not interested in that at all

because it would be the same kind of care she would get at home, only in a strange place. And she wanted to die in her own home.

Alexander MacKenzie

And your mother's health at the beginning of 2022 was— How would you say? What was her mental health?

[0010:00]

Michelle Kucher

At the beginning of 2020?

Alexander MacKenzie

2022.

Michelle Kucher

2022 is when she passed.

Alexander MacKenzie

Yes.

Michelle Kucher

Yeah, she had declined drastically as a result of isolation and depression and just really lost her will to live at that point.

Alexander MacKenzie

Now, leading up to that time, while you were living with her in her home, in her basement, can you describe— I believe you have described your mother to me as a social butterfly.

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

And could you tell me all about her being a social butterfly?

Michelle Kucher

Well, I mean, all her life she was surrounded by people, but during her last few years of her life, especially after my father died, she really needed to take care of her own mental health. She joined two different seniors' programs and attended seniors group meetings three times a week. Every Friday, she attended a lunch meeting with another program, called Links. She would go for lunch on a weekly basis with ex-coworkers. She was a legal secretary at the Federal Department of Justice and maintained friendships from that time in her life. She would go to church every single Sunday, rain or shine. She would do her own

grocery shopping. She, really, did everything for herself. And for me, it was quite difficult to actually get a date with her because her social calendar was so full. She thrived on being with people and she never missed an opportunity to tell her story.

Alexander MacKenzie

And some of these places that she was going to were the Gwen Selter facility, once a week; Holy Family, twice a week; St. Nicholas Ukrainian Church, once a week; and then these lunches for various people and so on.

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

And how about family gatherings, was she interested in those?

Michelle Kucher

Absolutely. My mother's house used to be a hub of activity throughout her life. We would have family dinners where 32 people would be eating at our table. She had ten grandchildren, seven great-grandchildren. They were the light of her life. She always, always welcomed the opportunity to spend time with them: whether it was in Winnipeg, or whether she had to fly to Vancouver or Toronto, or wherever her other grandchildren were at the time.

Alexander MacKenzie

And all this was before there were COVID mandates.

Michelle Kucher

Correct.

Alexander MacKenzie

Did anything change? And tell us about that.

Michelle Kucher

Well, the COVID restrictions— Our TV would bring us daily regulations and daily vaccine availability, and of course, there was the ominous death count that was on TV all the time.

My mother couldn't attend her seniors' programs because one of them was at a personal care home, and personal care homes had sort of gone into lockdown. Gwen Selter had shut down because there were restrictions on gatherings. Restaurants were closed, so going out for lunches was no longer possible. Church services were halted as a result of the inability to have gatherings.

Essentially, everything that meant anything to my mother had been taken away from her. Even having family gatherings, we had to keep our circle small. There was the social distancing regulations that were put in place. And as a result of all those things being taken

from my mother, her cognitive abilities drastically declined, and she became very withdrawn, very depressed, and really felt like she had nothing to look forward to in life.

Alexander MacKenzie

Did any of her friends pass away during those restrictive times?

Michelle Kucher

Absolutely. There was actually several that passed away and funeral services could not happen at the time. Many of her friends were residents of a care home that had a COVID outbreak and many of them died in care.

[00:15:00]

And then, yeah, we could not attend the funerals.

And those types of rituals for a person of my mother's age, who's very old school and quite a devout Catholic, those things were very important to her and her peers.

Alexander MacKenzie

Now, I understand that one of her granddaughters was a ray of light in all of this. How did that work?

Michelle Kucher

Well, when we were doing the Self and Family-Managed Care, one of the health care aides that I hired was my daughter. When the restrictions became very tight, that we had to not have people outside of the household visiting, my daughter decided to move into my mother's house with me. So we made our circle just a little bit bigger. And during that time, she had a baby, her first child, and we brought the baby back to my mother's house. And she was able to be a part of this little girl, sort of, crawling for the first time, walking for the first time. And that was, really, the only ray of sunshine that she had in such a bleak world.

Alexander MacKenzie

Now, I understand that things went on, more or less, in this way until September of 2021.

Michelle Kucher

September?

Alexander MacKenzie

Yeah, I'm sorry, is that— I believe at some point your mother had fallen?

Michelle Kucher

Yes, my mother did fall on September 20th of 2021. She had, for the first time ever, fallen forward and ended up with a bit of a rug burn on her forehead and quite a bruise. Usually, she would fall backwards and she would never hit her head because her back was so rounded, but this time she fell forward and that affected her a little bit.

Alexander MacKenzie

And in terms of her health, generally, then—in terms of respiratory health and fevers and so on—how was she doing?

Michelle Kucher

My mother had been diagnosed with congestive heart failure many years prior to this and she was entering the end stages of congestive heart: So she had a lot of swelling in her legs. She had a lot of breathing issues. She had a lot of fatigue, some confusion at times.

Alexander MacKenzie

And these things were all related, and diagnosed as being related, to congestive heart problems, right?

Michelle Kucher

Correct.

Alexander MacKenzie

So in October, I understand, she was admitted to a hospital, is that correct?

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

Which hospital was that?

Michelle Kucher

Seven Oaks.

Alexander MacKenzie

And that was for her congestive heart problem issues?

Michelle Kucher

Correct.

Alexander MacKenzie

And that was made plain to everyone?

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

And how old was your mom then?

Michelle Kucher

She had turned 95 years old October 9th, approximately two weeks prior to her going into the hospital.

Alexander MacKenzie

Okay, and did you visit your mom?

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

At the hospital?

Michelle Kucher

Yes. We all managed to make sort of a schedule so that she was being visited by different family members and friends on a regular basis.

Alexander MacKenzie

And did she let you know how she felt about these visits?

Michelle Kucher

They were the only thing that really kept her going. Yeah. But because of some restrictions, we could only visit one at a time.

Alexander MacKenzie

And how long did that continue?

Michelle Kucher

Up until towards the end of December 2021. Excuse me—

Alexander MacKenzie

You can take a moment if you wish. Take a moment if you wish.

Michelle Kucher

Sorry about that.

Alexander MacKenzie

No, no, that's all right.

Michelle Kucher

Towards the end of December of 2021, there was a COVID outbreak in Seven Oaks General Hospital,

[00:20:00]

on a different floor than where my mother was situated, and as a result of that, visiting was banned or stopped. The hospital went into a Code Red, I believe it's called.

Alexander MacKenzie

That was a lockdown, basically, then.

Michelle Kucher

Basically, yeah. The only people that could go would be staff and people who were deemed essential care providers.

Alexander MacKenzie

Now, you were your mother's care provider, were you not?

Michelle Kucher

I was her primary care provider, yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

You've used two words here: you use primary care provider for yourself, but the words you used a moment ago is essential care provider. What's the difference?

Michelle Kucher

An essential care provider would be somebody who would be attending the hospital to care for a patient on a regular basis. For example, coming every day to feed them their meals. Basically, taking over a job for the health care aides.

Alexander MacKenzie

I see. So in your capacity as your mother's primary caregiver, you were not qualified, is that right?

Michelle Kucher

That's correct.

Alexander MacKenzie

And so, your visits were cut off.

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

Did any other members of your family get to visit?

Michelle Kucher

No. No, the only people that my mother saw after that point would be the staff.

Alexander MacKenzie

Did you have occasion to discuss with any hospital staff your concerns about your mother's isolation?

Michelle Kucher

I did. I had gone to the hospital to visit my mother and was turned away by the screening staff at the door, saying that they're— That's how I found out that they were in a lockdown. They told me to phone the next day and talk to the unit manager to see if I could, possibly, get this designation given to me, to be the essential care provider.

I had phoned the hospital the next day and the nurse at the desk told me— Because I explained to her that my mother was 95, and quite possibly dying, and she was extremely lonely and the loneliness was what was killing her. It would have been hard for anybody in that situation to not have people visiting. And I, sort of, tried to make my case to be declared this essential care provider, and she told me that my mother's loneliness wasn't a reason enough to declare me as an essential care provider.

Alexander MacKenzie

Do you remember her exact words?

Michelle Kucher

Off the top of my head right now, no. I do know that I've said them to you, but I do not recall them exactly.

Alexander MacKenzie

You did say to me that the words spoken to you were, "Your mother's loneliness is not a priority." Is that accurate?

Michelle Kucher

Yes. That's correct.

Alexander MacKenzie

I don't know if you want to answer this question, but how did you feel about that?

Michelle Kucher

I was extremely angry. I sent emails and letters and left messages in a variety of different offices, expressing my disgust, actually, at that comment and just the whole situation in general.

Alexander MacKenzie

You never did see your mother again, prior to her death.

Michelle Kucher

Not alive, no.

Alexander MacKenzie

Now, you mentioned that your mom passed away on January the 10th.

Michelle Kucher

Correct.

Alexander MacKenzie

And so all of this was taking place, roughly, three weeks before her death.

Michelle Kucher

Correct.

Alexander MacKenzie

And when you were barred from going to the hospital, what did you do to try to keep in touch with your mom?

Michelle Kucher

Well, we attempted phone calls. There was a phone in her room and we would try to call, but most of the time the phone was out of her reach. And when it was in her reach, she really couldn't figure out how to use it. Often, we would have to phone the nursing station and say, "Look, I'm trying to call my mom and I don't know if she can reach the phone," and they would tell me that they would put the phone on her bed for her and then we could— Very rarely did we actually get through to my mom.

[00:25:00]

My brother would phone from his house in Toronto and hardly ever got to talk to my mom. It was a horrible, horrible experience. We thought about providing her with a cell phone, but, at that point in my mom's life, I don't know if she would have been able to use it.

Alexander MacKenzie

Now, in terms of your mom's health, what were you led to believe? She'd gone in for the congestive heart problems and what were you led to believe, as all this time was passing?

Michelle Kucher

Well, the goal was always to get her home, to stabilize her and get her home. And she was medically stable and the plan was, of course, like I said, to get her home. What held things up, essentially, was a lack of staffing for home care services.

Alexander MacKenzie

So when she was being cleared to come home, that was at the beginning of January, is that correct?

Michelle Kucher

Yes. Yes, we had been working on her getting home and getting staff in place for quite some time. The Self and Family-Managed Care Program was no longer available to us and she actually did get a discharge date.

Alexander MacKenzie

And what date was that?

Michelle Kucher

January 10th, 2022.

Alexander MacKenzie

So she was going to be discharged on January the 10th, 2022. Did you speak to her that day?

Michelle Kucher

I did speak with her on the phone and I let her know that she was coming home. I made arrangements for Stretcher Services to bring her home because I couldn't do it myself and she would not have been able to get in and out of my vehicle. And we made arrangements: Stretcher Services was to pick her up at 6:30 p.m., January 10th, 2022.

Alexander MacKenzie

But that didn't happen.

Michelle Kucher

No, it did not.

Alexander MacKenzie

What did happen?

Michelle Kucher

At approximately 5:15 to 5:30 p.m., I got a phone call from her doctor telling me that she had been found unresponsive. She was actually sitting on the toilet at the time. They brought her into her bed and there was nothing they could do to— She never did regain consciousness after that and she passed away.

Alexander MacKenzie

On the very day, an hour and a half before you were going to take her home.

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

What happened then? You had discussions with the doctor, I believe.

Michelle Kucher

I did. I asked him if I could come and see my mother and he told me that I could.

Alexander MacKenzie

And he made arrangements with the hospital, did he?

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

And then you did go to her.

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

Yeah.

Michelle Kucher

I went—

Alexander MacKenzie

Sorry, go ahead.

Michelle Kucher

Oh, yes, I went to the hospital and I went in— She was still in the room that she shared with her three other patients, curtains drawn, so she had some privacy. And I was able to sit with my mother, I was able to hold her hand, and I was able to talk to her. After she passed, I was sitting with her dead body. But I could not sit with her live body the day before or the day before that.

Alexander MacKenzie

You know, you've talked about your mother's sense of loneliness. Can you share with us how all of this made you feel?

Michelle Kucher

I mean, we always knew that, like, my mother was going to die, right? Obviously, she was 95 years old; she's in end-stages of congestive heart failure. We never got a chance to say goodbye. We couldn't go see her; we couldn't hug her. There were no more "I love you's" given. She died, alone, you know, possibly neglected because of the chronic short staff-ness, but I can't really comment on that because the nurses and the staff that worked there were really working hard.

I was angry. I was angry and I was sad. She didn't deserve that. We did everything right: we got our vaccinations; we kept our bubble relatively small; we socially isolated; we followed all the rules.

[00:30:00]

And still, the government that she was so obedient to failed her in the end, is the way I feel. I'm angry for her. I'm sad for her. And I think that what happened there was extremely wrong. My mother said to me, about three months into the pandemic, that she would rather die of COVID than die of loneliness, and she did not have that option.

Alexander MacKenzie

Sounds like, ultimately, she exercised that option. In any event, did you ever test positive for COVID?

Michelle Kucher

I did, just last October. I'm vaccinated. I've got two boosters on top of that. I work in a medical facility, so it's somewhat necessary. We have to be vaccinated in order to work under those circumstances. And I had been exposed to one of the patients having COVID.

Alexander MacKenzie

So your positive test was 10 months after her demise.

Michelle Kucher

Yes.

Alexander MacKenzie

Is there anything else that you would like to add, Michelle?

Michelle Kucher

I don't think so.

Alexander MacKenzie

If you will, I'll ask the commissioners if they have any questions that they would like to put to you.

Okay, it appears as though they do not. Thank you very, very much for attending.

Michelle Kucher

Thank you for the opportunity to tell my mother's story.

Alexander MacKenzie

Thank you, Michelle.

[00:31:51]

Final Review and Approval: Margaret Phillips, August 10, 2023.

The evidence offered in this transcript is a true and faithful record of witness testimony given during the National Citizens Inquiry (NCI) hearings. The transcript was prepared by members of a team of volunteers using an "intelligent verbatim" transcription method.

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