



Greyhound racing inquiry: Trainer got council ranger to destroy dogs as it was cheaper than vet

By Alison Branley

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A greyhound trainer has told a New South Wales inquiry he would use unqualified "muscle men" to manipulate his dogs' muscles and get a council ranger to destroy unwanted animals because vets were too expensive.

NSW north coast trainer Alexander Verhagen has given evidence at the resumption of the special commission of inquiry into greyhound racing.

The Karuah man said his dogs were checked over weekly by "muscle men" who would manipulate the muscles and spines of his greyhounds because they were cheaper than vets, and in his view more experienced.

Counsel assisting David Kell asked if Mr Verhagen knew this was against the advice of vets because muscle men were not qualified, and Mr Verhagen agreed.

He said he would drive unneeded dogs 250 kilometres to Robert Watson, a ranger at Kempsey Shire Council, who would destroy the dogs for free as part of a council service.

He told the inquiry he knew the industry code of practice stated dogs must be euthanased by a vet but Greyhounds NSW did not enforce the rules.

He said he routinely submitted paperwork indicating dogs had been destroyed by the council ranger.

"You're looking for scapegoats to blame people but it's absolutely the failure of Greyhounds NSW," he said.

"It was their failure. They never contacted me and said, you can't do that.

"There's heaps of things in there [the code of conduct] they never enforced. They had penalties for this and penalties for that, and never enforced them."

Missing drugs and inconsistent paperwork

The inquiry heard Kempsey Shire Council could not account for missing drugs that could kill up to 26 dogs.

Kempsey Council ranger and greyhound trainer Mr Watson gave evidence today about destroying dogs at the council pound and Kempsey racetrack.

The inquiry heard it took 10 millilitres of lethal barbiturates - called Lethabarb - to kill a dog.

During an internal audit Kempsey council could not account for 262 millilitres.



PHOTO: NSW north coast trainer Alexander Verhagen told the inquiry he hired muscle men for his dogs. (ABC News: Alison Branley)

MAP: NSW

You see Mr Watson that the cat has suddenly become a greyhound?

Counsel assisting Stephen Rushton

Between February and September this year the council had paperwork for about 30 greyhounds which had been surrendered to the council.

Counsel assisting Stephen Rushton suggested to the commission Mr Watson had actually euthanased 64 greyhounds in that period.

Mr Rushton also said there were many discrepancies among council paperwork.

Mr Watson told Mr Rushton he could not recall accessing the council pound register after being summonsed to the commission.

When questioning him about paperwork discrepancies Mr Rushton asked Mr Watson, "you see Mr Watson that the cat has suddenly become a greyhound?"

"You made that entry didn't you?"

"Yes," Mr Watson replied.

'This is your chance to come clean'

During the hearing, commissioner Michael McHugh warned Mr Watson he was under oath and that "this is your chance to come clean".

"Mr Watson you're getting in deeper and deeper," he said.

Mr Watson also said he euthanased a dog at Kempsey race track earlier this year at the request of its owner.

This was after the on-course vet had recommended the dog should not be destroyed and should instead have further tests.

"The owner wanted the dog put down," Mr Watson said.

The ranger said he had only ever destroyed dogs at the track and the pound.

He estimated he had put down up to 100 greyhounds this year following changes to animal welfare rules.

The commissions hearings finish on Friday.

The inquiry was established after the ABC's Four Corners program revealed evidence of animal cruelty, including live baiting, in the Australian greyhound industry.

The program, broadcast in February, showed footage of live piglets, possums and rabbits being fixed to mechanical lures and catapulted around tracks while being chased, and eventually killed, by dogs.

The inquiry resumed this week after hearings earlier in the year looked at live baiting.

It will now turn its attention to the life of a greyhound, injuries, rehoming and euthanasia practices - where dogs are put down by people other than vets.

It is expected to hear from experts including vets.

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