

CO-Gas Safety Unintentional Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Case Study

NIKKI WILLIS & Thomas Putt, Deceased in 2016



Age: 23

Fuel: Petrol

Appliance & location: Car engine and exhaust system

Notes by CO-Gas Safety: This case study is written by Nikki's mother, Michelle Hindson, and was published in our 2019 press pack. The fact that petrol and diesel engines produce carbon monoxide is too often overlooked. This car was parked in the open, not in an enclosed space, but modifications to the exhaust system had fatal consequences.

See also:

www.facebook.com/bbcnewseast/videos/1244028165652628/

Nikki Willis

My name is Michelle Hindson and Nikki Willis was my daughter. She was 23, and although every parent is biased, she was beautiful. Nikki had recently changed jobs, having worked with me for 5 years since leaving college where she had studied Sport.

Nikki was working on Sunday the 4th December. My husband and I had spent the day wrapping and labelling Christmas presents and had placed them under the tree. I had made dinner expecting Nikki to be home after work, but she sent me a text to say she was meeting a friend and would eat later. That was the last contact I ever had from Nikki.

The incident unfolded as follows –

On the morning of the 5th of December 2016 a car was seen outside my house with its lights on and engine running by my son when he went to work at 5.45 a.m., by myself at 7.30 a.m. when I went to work and by my husband when he went to a doctor's appointment at 9.30 a.m. None of us gave this car a second thought due to some visitors who frequently attended a nearby property.

My husband returned home at 10.30 a.m. while both my son and I were still at work. Shortly after my husband got back a mass of emergency vehicles began filling up the area outside my home. A Police officer called at the house advising my husband that 2 people had been found dead in a vehicle and to stay indoors, due to a suspected chemical incident. My husband then went to check on my daughter to tell her to stay indoors as she had asthma, only to find she wasn't home. My husband called me at work to see if I had had any contact with Nikki, which I had not. I then called my son, her place of work, a couple of her friends and her boyfriend. Panic began to set in as we could not find Nikki, no one had seen or heard from Nikki since the previous day.

Whilst I was at work and trying frantically to contact any of Nikki's friends, a connection was made that another of Nikki's friends, Tom Putt aged 20, could also not be contacted and that also no one had seen his car, a blue Fiesta. Suddenly the penny dropped, followed by a Police car arriving at my work with my husband. My daughter had been found dead in a car right outside my home.

The investigation into Nikki's death

The Police were initially unaware of how this incident had occurred. This meant we were not allowed back to our home while they carried out investigations. I was not allowed to have anything of

comfort from my daughter's room, nor were we allowed to see Nikki until they had completed the investigation. It was the 8th December before we could see Nikki and go home.

Post Mortem findings concluded Carbon Monoxide Poisoning, with no indication that this was done on purpose, (i.e. suicide or murder). Therefore, the vehicle was kept for further testing.

During the next 3 months we eventually had Nikki's belongings returned, her handbag, clothes, laptop and phone, as we prepared for a coroner's inquest.

Inquest

21st March 2017 we attended the coroner's court, where the coroner ruled Nikki's death as an accident. Mobile phone reports showed that Nikki and her friend were in the area from 10.00 p.m. on the 4th of December, but they were unable to determine a time of death.

A video was shown in court of the investigations carried out by Essex Police, along with the help of Ford. Ford supplied an identical car to the one Nikki was in and Essex Police conducted tests using smoke to make the findings visible. They also replicated the conditions of the night Nikki and her friend died.

The video showed that the catalytic converter had been removed and replaced with a 'straight pipe' (also known as a 'decat' pipe) this was done with the intention of enhancing performance of the car. It also showed that a bolt was missing and this meant the dangerous fumes were leaking into the engine bay (the area under the bonnet).

Vents had also been installed into the bonnet of the car and the matting normally found under a bonnet had also been removed.

As it was a cold night, Nikki and her friend had been sitting in the car having a chat, with the engine running and the heater on (Nikki hated the cold), this in turn was sucking the fumes from the engine bay straight back in to the car through the heater. Nikki's blood showed over 75% carbon monoxide in her system.

The test carried out using smoke to reconstruct the incident revealed the vehicle was now emitting 1000 times more carbon monoxide parts per million (ppm) than would have been legal to pass an MOT. (A legal amount is 0.2%) and in fact the testing had to be stopped because it became too dangerous for those carrying out the reconstruction. This was the information read out to the coroner by Essex Police, CID, DI Rob Kirby, all of which was documented and released by the press <https://www.facebook.com/EssexPoliceUK/videos/1310111392406091/>

What we as a family have learnt from this case

This tragedy taught us that people can think they know what they are doing with their vehicles, but sadly many don't and are not qualified to carry out such work. We have also found that support for the families of victims following such an incident is very hard to gain access to.

The vehicle was only 2 years old so would not have been required to have an MOT for another year, and had the conditions of that night been replicated in a traffic jam, following cars and occupants could have also been affected.

What needs to change

Awareness

In our opinion there needs to be much better awareness of the dangers of modifications to cars and how these increase the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning.

The existing law needs to be enforced

Secondly, as stated in the Government information sheet, many modifications are breaking the law. For example, if a catalytic converter was originally fitted at the point of manufacture, then the removal of this is breaking the law. Therefore, the law needs to be enforced.

A mobile carbon monoxide detector was used in the investigation so why can these not be made more available to the Police to remove potentially dangerous vehicles from the road? It clearly states on the Gov.uk website 'that emissions may also be checked as part of a roadside check', yet one Traffic Officer I spoke to did not even know this piece of equipment was available.

I made contact with my MP (Simon Burns, MP for Chelmsford, prior to his retirement, and Vicky Ford, MP for Chelmsford, his successor), who both took my concerns and questions to the Secretary for Transport, Chris Grayling MP, because clearly something needed to change. 12 months down the line, an information sheet has been published on the Gov.uk website. Please see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/modifying-your-vehicles-emissions/modifying-your-vehicles-emissions-the-legal-safety-and-health-implications> This was published on 2nd February 2018.

A recommendation was made by the coroner that initially Ford UK and Essex Police work with the families to raise this issue, However, to date we have not heard anything.

Michelle Hindson

CO-Gas Safety comment

This case study appeared in our 2019 Press Pack. Michelle kindly wrote an update for our 2020 Press Pack, which is available for download here: <https://www.co-gassafety.co.uk/information/press-pack-2020/>. Nikki's family have also launched a website to help those who lose loved ones to navigate the days, months and legal processes following a sudden death: <https://nikkishelp.co.uk>

