

Vancouver police task force referred to missing and murdered women as 'whores,' inquiry hears



Glenn Baglo/Postmedia News



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By Suzanne Fournier

VANCOUVER — Vancouver police officers and staff referred to the missing and murdered women as “hookers” or “whores,” made sexist remarks about female bosses and even disparaged grieving families, but the Vancouver Police Department does not suffer from “systemic bias,” an inquiry heard Tuesday.

Vancouver police Deputy Chief Doug LePard, author of a 400-page report critical of the Vancouver police and RCMP handling of the murdered women files, stuck to his guns after eight days of testimony at the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry.

Questioned by Vancouver lawyer Jason Gratl, who read out remarks he called “racist” and “homophobic” plucked from a mountain of

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LePard admitted some terms were "unfortunate" but argued that some pejorative words such as "hooker" were in common usage. LePard said he doesn't believe the Vancouver Police Department is riddled with "systemic bias" or racism, and that officers who used extremely offensive language were reviled by their peers.

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Gratl, acting for "affected Downtown Eastside individuals," also cited claims of rude and racist behaviour by Vancouver Police Department missing persons clerk Sandy Cameron.

The inquiry has heard that Cameron, who will testify next year, could be curt and dismissive to families of missing women, especially those who appeared to her to be "marginalized" or of First Nations descent.

In 1997, Cameron rebuffed Dorothy Purcell, the mother of Tanya Holyk — who was later confirmed as a murder victim of Robert Pickton — by saying that her daughter wouldn't be missing if she had been a better parent.

Some Vancouver police officers complained Cameron made racist remarks to and about First Nations people.

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The inquiry is investigating why it took Vancouver police and RCMP until 2002 to catch Pickton when they were receiving detailed tips as far back as 1998.

Pickton, 62, is serving a life sentence for the murders of six women. He initially was charged with killing 20 more but those charges were stayed in 2010.

The serial killer has been linked by DNA to the deaths of 33 women and has boasted to an undercover police officer that he killed at least 16 more.

Police officers must swear an oath to act "without favour or malice" but civilian staff are covered only by work site policy, LePard said.

Gratl noted that such policy wouldn't help people who approached Vancouver police looking for help in finding missing loved ones.

"That would not cover racist and bigoted conduct insofar as it affected the families, and it wouldn't do anything to assist the families of missing women," Gratl asserted, and LePard agreed.

LePard noted that Det. Const. Lori Shenher, whom he called "heroic" for her caring work on the missing women file, was appalled by the

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He said she told him she frequently had to apologize to the women of the Downtown Eastside for the behaviour of the "renegade" team of Det. Const. Doug Fell and Det. Const. Mark Wolthers, assigned to the case in 1999.

The two men didn't share information, were "loud" and "arrogant," habitually referred to survival sex-trade workers as "whores" and "f—ing whores," LePard admitted to Gratl. The duo also made openly racist and homophobic remarks and disparaged their female bosses as "incompetent."

As Gratl cited repeated internal Vancouver Police Department use of the term "hooker" or "hooker task force," LePard said the word, although pejorative, was once in common usage a dozen years ago, as in the book, *The Happy Hooker*.

"In fact, isolated incidents aside, on the whole, the record is clear that the VPD has taken crimes against sex-trade workers seriously," said LePard.

"Those individuals may have been biased [to sex workers] but I don't think it is indicative of systemic bias or racism in the VPD."

But LePard added the two detectives "were totally focused on catching a serial killer, they badly wanted to solve the case."

By the time LePard wrote his report, after Pickton was finally arrested in 2002, it was too late to discipline officers, he said.

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