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Exclusive National NSW Mental health

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## 'Feeling numb at crime scenes': Former top detective sues state



Angus Thompson

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A former top homicide detective who accused a NSW police minister of bowing to a family over a high-profile 1988 cold case claims she was severely mentally ill from years of policing and shouldn't have been assigned to lead the investigation.

Pamela Young, a detective chief inspector when she headed NSW Police's Unsolved Homicide Team, said she also shouldn't have been directed or allowed to do the April 2015 ABC interview that prompted the family of Scott Johnson to demand her removal from the inquest.



Detective chief inspector Pamela Young during the controversial ABC interview in April 2015. ABC

Now pursuing damages against the NSW government in the Supreme Court, Ms Young alleges in a statement of claim she was stood down from the probe in front of her team.

Medically discharged from the force in 2017, she claims her employer's negligence caused her to suffer an entrenched post-traumatic stress disorder, which rendered her unable to work since August 2015.

The government denies this in a defence filed in court.

In 2015 a NSW coroner ordered a third inquest into the death of Mr Johnson, whose body was found below a cliff at North Head, near Manly, amid his family's enduring belief the PHD student had fallen victim to a gay hate crime instead of suiciding.



Scott Johnson's body was found at the base of a cliff at North Head on December 10, 1988.

Appearing on *Lateline* in the wake of the announcement, Ms Young said she was "amazed and incredulous" after being called into a 2013 meeting with the Johnsons and former police minister Mike Gallacher, who she said had expected the resources of her team to be made available to the family.

"I saw a lot of what I describe as kowtowing by the minister and his staffers to Steve Johnson [Mr Johnson's brother] in particular," she said during the interview, which prompted then-Homicide Squad commander Mick Willing to label her comments "inopportune".

Ms Young alleges in her almost 33-years as a police officer she witnessed women being abused in bikie gang probes, investigated child sexual abuse, and attended numerous crime scenes where there were mutilated and decomposed bodies.

She said she suffered from symptoms of PTSD from 2002 and undertook a series of mandatory psychological checks between 2008 and 2013 that showed she was suffering from severe depression, anxiety and stress. In August 2012 she told a psychologist she experienced "feeling numb at crime scenes", it's alleged.

The state said Ms Young was certified fit for duty after each of the checks and denied it was foreseeable she was at risk of serious psychiatric harm.

Court documents state she was in February 2013 assigned to investigate Mr Johnson's death, two months before producing a medical certificate showing she was suffering from work-related major depression.

She said she told Superintendent Willing she might need time off work to see a psychologist, which the state doesn't admit, and in July lodged a form saying she had suffered psychological injury.

Ms Young alleges the *Lateline* interview was conducted at the "direction" of Superintendent Willing and multiple superiors, which the state denies, and resulted in her public criticism by Mr Johnson's family, politicians and the media.

The statement of claim alleges she should've been withdrawn from duties likely to render her PTSD a "disabling condition", not assigned her to the Johnson investigation, and supported her following the interview.

The state admits it had a "duty to take reasonable precautions for the safety" of Ms Young but denies she is entitled to damages, saying if she suffered injury, it was caused or contributed to by her own negligence, including failing to monitor her wellbeing and seek appropriate help.

**Lifeline 13 11 14; beyondblue 1300 224 636.**



**Angus Thompson** is a federal political reporter covering industrial relations for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age. Connect via [Twitter](#) or [email](#).

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