

Medical-Legal Death Investigation

Every state has a Medical-Legal Death Investigation system in place. It may be statewide, regional or county based.

Some states have Medical Examiner systems where physicians (usually) are appointed as Medical Examiners to oversee death investigations. Other states have elected Coroners. Forensic pathologists, who are specially trained in the area of death investigation and medical legal autopsies, may serve as Medical Examiners or Coroners or work under these public officials providing their expertise.

Each state determines which deaths are required to be reported to the Medical Examiner or Coroner who then determines the extent of their investigation. An investigation may end after a phone call or proceed to a scene investigation, physical examination of the person and possibly an autopsy.

The Medical-Legal autopsy is a specialized examination that integrates personal, social and medical history, scene investigation, external examination including clothing, internal examination of tissues, microscopic evaluation as well as toxicological, laboratory and evidentiary data. Such evaluation can take time as all the elements of the investigation are completed.

Terms

- **Autopsy:** Examination of the organs and tissues to identify diseases and injuries to determine the cause and manner of death.
- **Cause of Death:** The disease or injury that ultimately leads to a person's death. (e.g. stroke or heart attack)
- **Histology:** The study of the microscopic structure of tissues.
- **Forensic Pathology:** The subspecialty of pathology that focuses on the nature and cause of diseases & injuries and their relationship to legal issues.
- **Manner of Death:** The circumstance surrounding a death, such as: natural, accident, suicide, homicide, undetermined, or pending. A pending manner of death may be listed on a death certificate until an investigation is complete.
- **Toxicology:** The study of drugs, chemicals, and poisons and their effect on the body. Common tests included alcohol, over-the-counter and prescription medications, and illegal drugs.

Medical-Legal Death Investigation and Autopsy

Answers for Families and Friends

The National Association of Medical Examiners

And

The College of American Pathologists

*Prepared by the Forensic Pathology Resource Council
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The death of a loved one is often a difficult and confusing time. You may have to speak with doctors, nurses, fire department personnel, ambulance crews, police officers, and funeral directors, in addition to notifying family and friends. In some cases you may also speak with a representative of a Medical Examiner or Coroner's Office.

The Medical Examiner or Coroner is the official responsible for determining the cause and manner of death of people whose deaths are the result of injury or outside agents, or who died suddenly, unexpectedly or under questionable circumstances. The Medical Examiner or Coroner's Office is not part of any other agency including police, the Sheriff's Department, or any hospital, although they often work with people from these agencies.

You may speak with a representative from the Medical Examiner or Coroner's office who will gather information about the deceased that may be useful to determine the cause and manner of death. Depending on the circumstances surrounding death, the decedent may be released to a funeral home or taken to a medical facility for further investigation.

Reportable Deaths

Every state determines what deaths must be reported to the Medical Examiner or Coroner. In general, these cases include the following:

- Homicides and suicides
- Deaths following accidents, even if the injury is not the cause of death
- Deaths due to poisoning
- Deaths following abortion
- Deaths with unexplained, unusual or suspicious circumstances
- Deaths involving motor vehicles, snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles and boats.

Resources

www.cap.org
www.thename.org

Autopsy

In certain situations, the circumstances surrounding a person's death may require further examination. An autopsy may be performed to understand these circumstances and to establish the cause and manner of death. **Not every death reported requires an autopsy.**

Funeral arrangements do not have to be changed if an autopsy is performed. Family members may still view their loved one during funeral services.

During an autopsy the pathologist examines and documents any evidence of the person's medical conditions. This includes any disease or injuries. Small samples of blood, urine, or other fluids are usually sent for toxicological testing. Also, the physician may undertake a histological examination of small pieces of tissue.

The Medical Examiner or Coroner will determine the cause and manner of death for the person based upon all the information at hand, including the autopsy findings.