
FOREWORD

The King County Medical Examiner's Office serves the community by investigating sudden, unexpected, violent, suspicious, or unnatural deaths. Medical Examiner staff recognize the tragedy surrounding an untimely death and perform investigations, in part, to assist the grieving family. A complete investigation provides for the expeditious settling of estates and insurance claims, as well as for implementing civil and criminal actions. Questions which seem irrelevant in the initial hours after death can become significant in the following months. The surviving family, friends, and general public can have the assurance that the Medical Examiner conducted a comprehensive investigation.

When a death occurs on the job or is work related, we immediately forward the results of our investigation to the State Department of Labor and Industries so that the family can gain the full benefit of our findings. Private insurance companies also routinely use our findings to settle claims. Whenever a consumer product is implicated in a death, we notify the Consumer Product Safety Commission to ensure that the product is studied and the necessary steps are taken to protect the public. The public health dimension of the Medical Examiner's function is designed to isolate and identify causes of sudden, unexpected death. When an infectious agent or poison is implicated in a death, we notify the family and contacts of the deceased so they may receive any needed medical treatment. In this era of concern regarding bioterrorism, the Medical Examiner provides an important level of surveillance for such possibilities.

Civil or criminal judicial proceedings frequently require the medical investigation of violent death. Thus, the King County Medical Examiner's Office conducts a prompt medical investigation to provide the criminal justice system with medical information and evidence required for adjudication. Although criminal death investigations constitute a small portion of deaths investigated by the Medical Examiner, these deaths are studied in great detail because of the issues and legal consequences involved. In this way, the King County Medical Examiner's Office offers the criminal justice system the best support that medical science can provide.

In summary, the King County Medical Examiner's Office brings trained medical evaluation to the investigation of deaths that are of concern to the health, safety, and welfare of the community.

DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE
of the
Public Health – Seattle & King County
King County Medical Examiner's Office

In 1968, the Home Rule Charter abolished the King County Office of the Coroner, which was replaced with the King County Medical Examiner's Office. The Medical Examiner's Office is within the Prevention Division of Public Health – Seattle & King County. Although the Department of Public Health is a combined City-County department, the King County Medical Examiner's Office is funded by King County and is under the King County Executive.

The Chief Medical Examiner is a physician trained and certified in Forensic Pathology - the branch of medicine concerned with the scientific investigation of sudden, unexpected, violent, suspicious, or unnatural deaths. There are four sections under the Chief Medical Examiner's direction: Forensic Pathology, Scene Investigation, Autopsy Support and Administrative Support. The duties of these four sections include the performance of autopsies when indicated, certification of death, field investigation of scene and circumstances of death, identification of the deceased, notification of next-of-kin, and control and disposition of the deceased's personal property.

Deaths that come under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner are defined by state statute (RCW 68.50) and include, but are not limited to, the following circumstances:

1. *Persons who die suddenly when in apparent good health and without medical attendance within thirty-six hours preceding death.* This category is reserved for the following situations: (1) Sudden death of an individual with no known natural cause for the death. (2) Death during an acute or unexplained rapidly fatal illness, for which a reasonable natural cause has not been established. (3) Death of an individual who was not under the care of a physician. (4) Death of a person in a nursing home or other institution where medical treatment is not provided by a licensed physician.
2. *Circumstances which indicate death was caused in part or entirely by unnatural or unlawful means.* This category includes but is not limited to: (1) Drowning, suffocation, smothering, burns, electrocution, lightning, radiation, chemical or thermal injury, starvation, environmental exposure, or neglect. (2) Unexpected death during, associated with, or as a result of diagnostic or therapeutic procedures. (3) All deaths in the operating room whether due to surgical or anesthetic procedures. (4) Narcotics or other drugs including alcohol or toxic agents, or toxic exposure. (5) Death thought to be associated with, or resulting from, the decedent's occupation, including chronic occupational disease such as asbestosis and black lung. (6) Death of the mother caused by known or suspected

- abortion. (7) Death from apparent natural causes during the course of a criminal act, e.g., a victim collapses during a robbery. (8) Death that occurs within one year following an accident, even if the accident is not thought to have contributed to the cause of death. (9) Death following all injury producing accidents, if recovery was considered incomplete or if the accident is thought to have contributed to the cause of death (regardless of the interval between the accident and death).
3. *Suspicious circumstances.* This category includes, but is not limited to, deaths under the following circumstances: (1) Deaths resulting from apparent homicide or suicide. (2) Hanging, gunshot wounds, stabs, cuts, strangulation, etc. (3) Alleged rape, carnal knowledge, or sodomy. (4) Death during the course of, or precipitated by, a criminal act. (5) Death that occurs while in a jail or prison, or while in custody of law enforcement or other non-medical public institutions.
 4. *Unknown or obscure causes.* This category includes: (1) Bodies that are found dead. (2) Death during or following an unexplained coma.
 5. *Deaths caused by any violence whatsoever, when the injury was the primary cause or a contributory factor in the death.* This category includes, but is not limited to: (1) Injury of any type, including falls. (2) Any death due to or contributed to by any type of physical trauma.
 6. *Contagious disease.* This category includes only those deaths wherein the diagnosis is undetermined and the suspected cause of death is a contagious disease which may be a public health hazard.
 7. *Unclaimed bodies.* This category is limited to deaths where no next of kin or other legally responsible representatives can be identified for disposition of the body.
 8. *Premature and stillborn infants.* This category includes only those stillborn or premature infants whose birth was precipitated by maternal injury, criminal or medical negligence, or abortion under unlawful circumstances.

MISSION STATEMENT

*of the
Public Health – Seattle & King County
King County Medical Examiner's Office*

The mission of the King County Medical Examiner's Office (KCMEO) is to investigate sudden, unexpected and unnatural deaths in King County with the highest level of professionalism, compassion and efficiency and to provide a resource for improving the health and safety of the community consistent with the general mission of Public Health.

To achieve this mission, KCMEO will:

Coordinate investigative efforts with law enforcement, hospitals, and other agencies in a professional and courteous manner.

Treat decedents and their effects with dignity and respect, and without discrimination.

Conduct investigations and autopsies professionally, scientifically, and conscientiously; and complete reports expeditiously with regard for the concerns of family members, criminal justice, and public health and safety.

Provide compassion, courtesy, and honest information to family members and, with sensitivity for cultural differences, make appropriate efforts in assisting with their grief, medical and legal questions, disposition of decedents and effects, and other settlements.

Collect, compile, and disseminate information regarding deaths in a manner consistent with the laws of Washington State and consistent with the mission of Public Health.

Provide medical and scientific testimony in court and in deposition as well as medicolegal consultation for prosecuting attorneys, defense attorneys, and attorneys representing surviving family members.

Promote and advance, through education and research, the sciences and practices of death investigation, pathology, and anthropology within KCMEO and in collaboration with educational institutions.

Promote and maintain an emotionally and physically healthy and safe working environment for KCMEO employees, following Public Health policies for standards of conduct, management, and support for employee diversity, training, and development.

Expand communication throughout Public Health and the community at large regarding the roles, responsibilities, and objectives of KCMEO.