



International Association of Forensic Nurses

The Forensic Nurse as a Death Investigator

In the United States, responsibility for death investigation lies with either the coroner or the medical examiner. A coroner is an elected official who, in some jurisdictions, has no specific educational requirements. A Medical Examiner is generally an appointed physician with training in forensic pathology. There are currently 11 Coroner states, 22 Medical Examiner states, and 18 states that employ some combination of both.

Every state/county has different needs and resources, and every state/county may run death investigations with a different approach. What matters is that every effort be made to ensure a thorough, accurate, and timely investigation. A faulty cause of death determination can significantly impact surviving family members, agencies responsible for planning public health policy, civil or criminal action, and even public safety.

Research the death investigation system in your state.

The three critical components of any death investigation are medical/social history, examination of the body, and scene investigation. If any one component is lacking, the investigation is incomplete. In counties where non-medical Deputy Medical Examiners are being asked to conduct the majority of a death investigation, medical expertise should be readily accessible to them. A forensically trained nurse can be an ideal medical representative in these situations.

A nurse who assists with death investigation must first be an experienced and competent nurse, preferably with considerable experience in the ER and/or ICU. It is in the clinical setting that the nurse will develop and refine analytical assessment skills and learn to handle the psychosocial events that often accompany an unexpected or traumatic death. At a minimum, the nurse should also earn certification through the [American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators](#) (ABMDI).

Some deaths may occur as a result of a criminal event, but every death is a medical event. The presence or absence of specific signs, symptoms, medications, and treatments can speak volumes to medical investigators. When a forensically trained physician is not accessible, an experienced and qualified forensic nurse can serve as an ideal alternative.

Other Resources

[Medical Examiner and Coroner Systems Report](#)

Recently released report on medical examiner and coroner systems in the U.S. by the DOJ.

Submitted by:

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