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**Organizational and Foundational Standard for  
Medicolegal Death Investigation**



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## Organizational and Foundational Standard for Medicolegal Death Investigation

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## Foreword

Medicolegal death investigation systems, including the public health, public safety, and law enforcement communities that support them, are responsible for conducting death investigations and certifying the cause and manner of deaths in the United States and abroad. The importance of medicolegal death investigation has been highlighted by the National Research Council of the National Academies, the National Commission on Forensic Science, and the National Science and Technology Council. The role of the medicolegal death investigator, the medical examiner, or coroner is to investigate any death falling under their jurisdictional authority. Jurisdictional authorities vary based on state and national legal mandates, but generally include deaths that are unattended, known or suspected to be of unnatural means, unexplained, or of public health interest. Unnatural and unexplained deaths include homicides, suicides, unintentional injuries, drug-related deaths, and other disease-related deaths that are sudden or unexpected. These deaths have important national public health and public safety implications. Processes followed by fully competent medicolegal death investigation systems optimize public health and public safety engagement, while bringing comfort and answers to the newly bereaved. The educational frameworks, operational roles, and processes for competent medicolegal death investigation are described here.

This document is designed for use by medicolegal death investigators, coroners, and medical examiners and may serve as a reference for law enforcement agencies, the legal community, the medical community, public health officials, and the public at large to define the fundamentals of medicolegal death investigation. This document may be referenced for inclusion in community resource allocation and planning in order to adequately support medicolegal death investigation responsibilities. This document can be leveraged as a tool for federal, state, local and tribal governments to justify projects, programs, and the development of standard operating procedures backed by sound medicolegal death investigation data. Actions taken in response to information contained within this document shall only be initiated once such actions are determined to be in full compliance with local, state, and federal laws. Jurisdictional, logistical, or legal considerations may necessarily limit implementation. This document does not purport to address all of the safety concerns, if any, associated with its use. It is the responsibility of the user of this standard to establish appropriate safety and health practices and determine the applicability of regulatory limitations prior to use.

This standard articulates the use and applicability of a comprehensive compilation of existing standards and guidelines. This standard was developed using information sourced from government and professional publications widely accepted in the medicolegal death investigation community as representative of best practice standards.

This document was revised, prepared, and finalized as a standard by the Medicolegal Death Investigation Consensus Body of the AAFS Standards Board. The draft of this standard was developed by the Medicolegal Death Investigation Subcommittee of the Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) for Forensic Science.

The AAFS Standards Board (ASB) is an ANSI-accredited Standards Developing Organization with the purpose of providing accessible, high quality science-based consensus forensic standards. The ASB is a wholly owned subsidiary of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS), established in 2015 and accredited by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) in 2016. The ASB consists of Consensus Bodies (CB), which are open to all materially interested and affected individuals, companies, and organizations; a Board of Directors; and Staff.

All hyperlinks and web addresses shown in this document are current as of the publication date of this standard.

**Keywords:** *medicolegal death investigation; autopsy; forensic pathologist; medicolegal death investigator; forensic pathology; death certification; cause of death; manner of death; coroner; medical examiner; professional certification*

**Table of Contents**

1 Scope ..... 1

2 Normative References ..... 1

3 Terms and Definitions ..... 2

4 Requirements ..... 4

4.1 General ..... 4

4.2 Infrastructure ..... 4

4.3 Resourcing the Broader Medicolegal Death Investigation Mandate ..... 5

4.4 Personnel Roles, Responsibilities, Training Requirements, and Competencies ..... 5

4.5 Required Practices ..... 7

4.6 Certification ..... 8

4.7 Accreditation ..... 8

Annex A (informative) Bibliography ..... 9

# Organizational and Foundational Standard for Medicolegal Death Investigation

## 1 Scope

This document outlines the minimum requirements, fundamental activities, general procedures, facilities, and personnel that are the basic components of a medicolegal death investigation system. This document provides an overarching description of educational frameworks, operational roles, and processes for the medicolegal death investigation system.

## 2 Normative References

The following references are documents that are indispensable for the application of the standard. For dated references, only the edition cited applies. For undated references, the latest edition of the referenced document (including any amendments) applies.

*Death Investigation: A Guide for the Scene Investigator* (Technical Update). National Institute of Justice. 2011<sup>a</sup>.

Luzi SA, et al. *Medical Examiners' Independence is Vital for the Health of the American Legal System*. *Acad Forensic Pathol*. 2013 3 (1): 84-92.<sup>b</sup>

Melinek J. et. al. *National Association of Medical Examiners Position Paper: Medical Examiner, Coroner, and Forensic Pathologist Independence*. *Acad Forensic Pathol*. 2013 3 (1): 93-98.<sup>c</sup>

Middleton et. al. *National Association of Medical Examiners Position Paper: Retaining Postmortem Samples for Genetic Testing*. *Acad Forensic Pathol*. 2013 3 (2): 191-194.<sup>d</sup>

*Sudden, Unexplained Infant Death Investigation: A Guide for the Scene Investigator*. 2007.<sup>e</sup>

SWGMDI, *Principles for Communicating with Next of Kin During Medicolegal Death Investigations*/ 2012.<sup>f</sup>

SWGMDI, *Standards for Interactions Between Medical Examiner/Coroner Offices and Organ and Tissue Procurement Organizations and Eye Banks*. 2013.<sup>g</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> Available from: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/234457.pdf>.

<sup>b</sup> Available from: <https://doi.org/10.23907/2013.012>

<sup>c</sup> Available from: <https://doi.org/10.23907/2013.013>

<sup>d</sup> Available from: <https://doi.org/10.23907/2013.024>

<sup>e</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA.

Available from: [https://www.cdc.gov/sids/pdf/curriculumguide\\_tag508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/sids/pdf/curriculumguide_tag508.pdf)

<sup>f</sup> Scientific Working Group for Medicolegal Death Investigation (SWGMDI), Available from:

[https://www.nist.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2018/04/25/swgmdi\\_principles\\_for\\_communicating\\_with\\_next\\_of\\_kin\\_during\\_medicolegal\\_death\\_investigations.pdf](https://www.nist.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2018/04/25/swgmdi_principles_for_communicating_with_next_of_kin_during_medicolegal_death_investigations.pdf)

<sup>g</sup> Scientific Working Group for Medicolegal Death Investigation (SWGMDI), Available from:

[https://www.nist.gov/system/files/documents/2018/04/25/swgmdi\\_standards\\_for\\_interactions\\_between\\_medical\\_examiner\\_coroner\\_offices\\_and\\_organ\\_and\\_tissue\\_procurement\\_organizations\\_and\\_eye\\_banks.pdf](https://www.nist.gov/system/files/documents/2018/04/25/swgmdi_standards_for_interactions_between_medical_examiner_coroner_offices_and_organ_and_tissue_procurement_organizations_and_eye_banks.pdf)

### 3 Terms and Definitions

For purposes of this document, the following definitions apply.

#### 3.1

##### **accreditation**

The formal recognition by an independent accreditation body that a medicolegal system, office, or agency meets or exceeds a prescribed set of standards.

#### 3.2

##### **accreditation body**

An independent body that verifies that a medicolegal system, office, or agency meets nationally or internationally recognized quality standards established through consensus, and is competent to carry out specific conformity assessment tasks to perform accreditation.

#### 3.3

##### **American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators**

##### **ABMDI**

A voluntary national, not-for-profit, independent professional certification board that has been established to promote the highest standards of practice for medicolegal death investigators (see [www.abmdi.org](http://www.abmdi.org)).

#### 3.4

##### **cause of death**

A medical opinion of the disease or injury that resulted in a person's death.

#### 3.5

##### **certification**

Procedure by which a third party gives written assurance that a person, product, process, or service conforms to specific requirements (ISO/IEC Guide 2:2016).

#### 3.6

##### **chief medicolegal officer**

The medical examiner, coroner, justice of the peace or other official who oversees the operation of a medicolegal death investigation office and/or system.

#### 3.7

##### **coroner**

An elected or appointed official whose duty is to oversee medicolegal death investigations, usually for a single county, and ensure certification of cause and manner of death; duties vary based on local enabling statutes.

#### 3.8

##### **eye bank**

Organization responsible for recovering corneas/eyes from donors.

#### 3.9

##### **forensic autopsy**

An autopsy authorized by law, and typically performed under the jurisdiction of a medical examiner or coroner for criminal justice and public health purposes.

### **3.10**

#### **forensic pathologist**

A physician who is board-certified in anatomic pathology or anatomic and clinical pathology, as well as forensic pathology.

### **3.11**

#### **forensic pathology**

The practice of medicine in which the principles of pathology are applied to problems of potential legal, public health, or public safety significance; a common function is the performance of autopsies to determine the cause of death and assist in determining the manner of death.

### **3.12**

#### **genetic testing**

A type of medical test that identifies changes in chromosomes, genes, or proteins. The results of a genetic test can confirm or rule out a suspected genetic condition.

### **3.13**

#### **International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners IACME**

An international professional organization for medicolegal death investigation offices, coroners, medical examiners, and other practitioners of medicolegal death investigation that provides education and training. IACME offers a voluntary inspection and accreditation program for medicolegal death investigation offices (see [www.theiacme.com](http://www.theiacme.com)).

### **3.14**

#### **manner of death**

Classification system based on the circumstances under which death occurred; includes accident, homicide, natural, suicide, and undetermined.

### **3.15**

#### **medical examiner**

An appointed forensic pathologist whose duty is to oversee medicolegal death investigations, perform postmortem examinations, and certify cause and manner of death. In some jurisdictions, individuals with other qualifications hold the title “Medical Examiner”, but for purposes of this document those individuals are considered medicolegal death investigators.

### **3.16**

#### **medicolegal death investigation**

A formal inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of a human being; investigative information is considered with autopsy findings and adjunctive studies (if performed) to determine the cause and manner of death.

### **3.17**

#### **medicolegal death investigation system**

Medicolegal death investigation office (usually medical examiner or coroner office) within a state or district that is a jurisdictional unit and, which may have a single chief medicolegal officer.

### **3.18**

#### **medicolegal death investigator**

An individual who performs medicolegal death investigations.

**3.19****National Association of Medical Examiners****NAME**

International professional organization of physician medical examiners, medicolegal death investigators, and death investigation system administrators that promulgates education and professionalism in medicolegal death investigation and has established and publishes a set of forensic autopsy performance standards. NAME offers a voluntary inspection and accreditation program for medicolegal death investigation offices (see: [www.thename.org](http://www.thename.org)).

**3.20****organ procurement organization****OPO**

Organization responsible for recovering organs from donors.

**3.21****pathologist-in-training (resident/fellow)**

A physician who has graduated from medical school and is either in a pathology residency or a forensic pathology fellowship program.

**3.22****tissue procurement organization****TPO**

Organization responsible for recovering tissues from tissue donors.

**4 Requirements****4.1 General**

High quality medicolegal death investigation depends on facilities, personnel (to include training and competencies), resources, and processes. Existing guidance, standards, and requirements for each of the elements and their use are presented in this section.

**4.2 Infrastructure**

**4.2.1** Any office conducting medicolegal death investigations shall have adequate facilities and equipment to fulfill the office's statutory mandates and accomplish the office's mission (see section 4.2.3 for what constitutes an adequate facility).

**4.2.2** There shall be sufficient information technology infrastructure to support data collection, analysis, and sharing.

**4.2.3** Professional organizations have published references for what constitutes an adequate facility. These include:

- a) *SWGMDI Regional Medicolegal Autopsy and Death Investigation Centers – Construction, Staffing and Costs*<sup>[7]</sup>,
- b) *NAME Inspection and Accreditation Checklist*<sup>[5]</sup>,
- c) *IACME Inspection & Accreditation Checklist*<sup>[4]</sup>.

### **4.3 Resourcing the Broader Medicolegal Death Investigation Mandate**

**4.3.1** Medical Examiner and Coroner offices have responsibilities that extend well beyond evaluation of cases from a legal perspective. Public health and policy tasks represent a large and demanding mandate for most modern offices in the United States, particularly in jurisdictions with large catchment areas. Offices shall be provided with the resources, including personnel, time, space, data infrastructure, and funding to meet these needs. Common responsibilities are:

- a) public health surveillance;
- b) data sharing with local, state, and federal health agencies;
- c) participation in child death reviews;
- d) participation in specialty reviews such as elder care and institutional care;
- e) participation in product safety reviews;
- f) participation in quality improvement programs in local hospitals, such as trauma review boards;
- g) participation in policy development, legislation, and process evaluation with local agencies.

**4.3.2** Medical practice remuneration policies in the United States have evolved in a way that has diminished the performance of autopsies in general medicine. However, the importance of autopsy pathology in general medical practice continues to be demonstrated in the medical literature, and education in autopsy pathology remains an integral part of pathology training. There should be funding that recognizes and supports this role.

**4.3.3** Forensic pathology is a scientific discipline that involves aspects of both forensic science and traditional medicine. Many aspects of practice are unique to this specialty, and advancement of medical knowledge in forensic pathology and medicolegal death investigation requires research and scientific inquiry directed specifically to those needs. Moreover, because many Medical Examiner/Coroner offices are not part of academic institutions, they do not have access to traditional research funding mechanisms. Resources and opportunities should be provided for medical research, investigative research, and advancement in the discipline. Participation in this effort should be an integral part of the vision and process of medicolegal death investigation offices.

## **4.4 Personnel Roles, Responsibilities, Training Requirements, and Competencies**

### **4.4.1 General**

**4.4.2** Any office conducting medicolegal death investigations shall have an adequate number of specialized, well-trained personnel to fulfill the office's statutory mandates and accomplish the office's mission (see section 4.2.3. for what constitutes an adequate number of specialized personnel).

### **4.4.3 Forensic Pathologist**

**4.4.3.1** A forensic pathologist shall be a physician who is certified in forensic pathology by the American Board of Pathology (ABP, a member of the American Board of Medical Specialties), or its international equivalent.

**4.4.3.2** Forensic pathologists can hold different titles according to how they are defined by the legal framework mandated by a given jurisdiction. Titles commonly used include medical examiner and coroner, however, regardless of the job title, or method of appointment or employment, all the requirements shall apply.

**4.4.3.3** Forensic pathology training and curricula must meet the requirements defined by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) and ABP for Board Certification.

**4.4.3.4** The following are competencies that shall be demonstrated by forensic pathologists to meet the requirements for a death investigation system.

**4.4.3.4.1** Know of and adhere to professional autopsy standards, such as NAME's articulated competencies including those published in the *Forensic Autopsy Performance Standards*<sup>[5]</sup>

**4.4.3.4.2** Recognize the significance of autopsies to determine the cause of death and assist in determining the manner of death because they are performed for suspicious, violent, unexplained or unexpected deaths.

**4.4.3.4.3** Recognize that data and information gathered from autopsies serve not only the families of the deceased, but also the public, law enforcement, and the justice system.

### **4.4.4 Medical Examiner**

**4.4.4.1** Medical examiners oversee medicolegal death investigations, perform postmortem examinations, and certify cause and manner of death.

**4.4.4.2** They are forensic pathologists and are appointed to their position.

**4.4.4.3** In some jurisdictions people with other qualifications hold the title "Medical Examiner." These individuals do not satisfy this document's definition of medical examiner and for purposes of this document those individuals are considered medicolegal death investigators.

### **4.4.5 Coroner**

**4.4.5.1** A coroner's duty is to oversee medicolegal death investigations, usually for a single county, and ensure certification of the cause and manner of death.

**4.4.5.2** They are elected or appointed.

**4.4.5.3** Prerequisites and training requirements for coroners are defined by the jurisdiction. Some jurisdictions do not require that a coroner have a medical professional training background, but in other jurisdictions the coroner is required to be a physician, and in others the coroner is required to be a board certified forensic pathologist.

**4.4.5.4** Unless they are a forensic pathologist, a coroner who performs the role of medicolegal death investigator shall be certified in medicolegal death investigation by a Forensic Science Accreditation Board (FSAB) accredited certifying board for medicolegal death investigators, such as the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI), or international equivalent. Coroners with purely administrative duties who do not perform any medicolegal death investigator role should be certified.

#### **4.4.6 Medicolegal Death Investigator**

**4.4.6.1** Medicolegal death investigators act on behalf of the medical examiner or coroner to investigate deaths that may fall under the jurisdiction of the office. Their activities include, but are not limited to, determining jurisdiction and extent of initial investigation, assisting with determination of cause and manner of death, identifying the decedent, notifying next of kin, and securing personal property.

**4.4.6.2** They are professionals who shall be certified by a Forensic Science Accreditation Board (FSAB) accredited certifying board for medicolegal death investigators, such as the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI), or an international equivalent. They investigate deaths in the jurisdiction of the medical examiner, coroner, or federal equivalent. A medicolegal death investigator in training for certification shall work under the supervision of a certified medicolegal death investigator or forensic pathologist.

**4.4.6.3** A medicolegal death investigator can have one of many different job titles, the most common being Coroner/Assistant Coroner, Coroner investigator, Deputy coroner, Medical examiner, Medical examiner investigator, Forensic Investigator, Death investigator, or Medicolegal death investigator depending on local convention, type of system and local statutes.

**4.4.6.4** Know of and adhere to guidelines for conducting medicolegal death investigations, such as the *Death Investigation: A Guide for the Scene Investigator*.

#### **4.5 Required Practices**

**4.5.1** Every office shall adhere to the practices outlined in this section.

**4.5.2** All reported deaths shall be initially assessed by a certified forensic pathologist and/or a certified medicolegal death investigator, to include evaluation of the circumstances of death, determination of jurisdiction, and define the scope of the investigation.

**4.5.3** The cause of death shall be determined by a forensic pathologist.

NOTE 4.5.3 and 4.5.4 only apply to cases where the office is responsible for determining the cause and/or manner of death.

**4.5.4** The manner of death shall be assigned by a forensic pathologist, or the chief medicolegal officer (or designee) in consultation with a forensic pathologist.

**4.5.5** All forensic autopsies shall be performed by a forensic pathologist, or by a pathologist in training (resident/fellow) who is directly supervised by a forensic pathologist.

**4.5.6** The chief medicolegal officer or designee(s) shall participate in multi-disciplinary death review teams (e.g., infant/child fatality review teams).

**4.5.7** Medicolegal death investigators or appropriate personnel shall collect blood and/or appropriate samples, whenever possible, for potential genetic and toxicological testing in sudden, unexplained deaths that remain unexplained at the completion of the autopsy.

**4.5.8** Medicolegal death investigators and medicolegal death investigation offices shall specify and require practices so as to be free from undue influence or coercion by other agencies, offices or any source.

**4.5.9** Medicolegal death investigations shall be parallel to but distinct from investigations by other offices or agencies (e.g., law enforcement, child protective services, state and federal agencies, etc.).

**4.5.10** The office shall follow the practices and guidelines established by:

- a) *Death Investigation: A Guide for the Scene Investigator.*
- b) *Medical Examiner, Coroner, and Forensic Pathologist Independence.*
- c) *Medical Examiners' Independence is Vital for the Health of the American Legal System.*
- d) *Principles for Communicating with Next of Kin During Medicolegal Death Investigations.*
- e) *Retaining Postmortem Samples for Genetic Testing.*
- f) *Sudden, Unexplained Infant Death Investigation: A Guide for the Scene Investigator.*
- g) *Standards for Interactions Between Medical Examiner/Coroner Offices and Organ and Tissue Procurement Organizations and Eye Banks.*

## **4.6 Certification**

**4.6.1** *Forensic Pathology Certifications*—All forensic pathologists shall be certified in forensic pathology by a member board of the American Board of Medical Specialties, such as the American Board of Pathology (ABP) or an international equivalent.

**4.6.2** *Medicolegal Death Investigator Certifications*—All persons performing medicolegal death investigations shall be certified in medicolegal death investigation by a Forensic Science Accrediting Board (FSAB) accredited certifying board, such as the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI) or an international equivalent.

## **4.7 Accreditation**

**4.7.1** All organizations conducting medicolegal death investigation shall be accredited by an inspection and accreditation program for medicolegal death investigative offices. Accreditation of medicolegal investigation offices can be performed by third party accreditation organizations (e.g., the National Association of Medical Examiners and the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners).

## Annex A (informative)

### Bibliography

This is not meant to be an all-inclusive list; other publications on this subject may exist. At the time this standard was drafted, these were the publications used for reference.

- 1] DHHS Publication No. (PHS) 2003-1110. *Medical examiners' and coroners' handbook on death registration and fetal death reporting*<sup>h</sup>.
- 2] Hanzlick R (ed). *Cause of death and the death certificate: Important Information for Physicians, Medical Examiners, Coroners, and the Public*. 2006<sup>i</sup>.
- 3] IACME, *Inspection and Accreditation Checklist*.
- 4] NAME *Inspection and Accreditation Checklist*. 2018<sup>k</sup>.
- 5] NAME *Forensic Autopsy Performance Standards*. 2005, Revised 2016<sup>l</sup>.
- 6] *Regional Medicolegal Autopsy and Death Investigation Centers-Construction, Staffing, and Costs*. A Report and Recommendations Prepared by the System Infrastructure Committee of the Scientific Working Group on Medicolegal Death Investigation (SWGMDI). 2013<sup>m</sup>.
- 7] *Strengthening Forensic Science in the United States, A Path Forward*. Committee on Identifying the Needs of the Forensic Sciences Community, National Research Council. 2009<sup>n</sup>.
- 8] *Strengthening the Medicolegal-Death-Investigation System: Improving Data Systems*. Executive Office of the President. National Science and Technology Council. 2016<sup>o</sup>.
- 9] SWGMDI, *Facilities Workplace Locations of Board Certified Forensic Pathologists in the United States who Perform Medicolegal Autopsies for Medical Examiner/Coroner Systems*<sup>p</sup>.

**Medicolegal death investigation documents adopted by the National Commission on Forensic Science (NCFS) can be downloaded from:**

<https://www.justice.gov/archives/ncfs/work-products-adopted-commission>.

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<sup>h</sup> Available from: [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/misc/hb\\_me.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/misc/hb_me.pdf)

<sup>i</sup> Available from: <http://ebooks.cap.org/product/cause-death-certificate>.

<sup>j</sup> Available from: <https://www.theiacme.com/images/standards.pdf>.

<sup>k</sup> Available from: <https://www.thename.org/assets/docs/NAME%20Accreditation%20Checklist%202019%20-%202024.pdf>.

<sup>l</sup> Available from: <https://name.memberclicks.net/assets/docs/684b2442-ae68-4e64-9ecc-015f8d0f849e.pdf>.

<sup>m</sup> Available from: [https://www.nist.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2018/04/25/swgmdi\\_regional\\_medicolegal\\_autopsy\\_and\\_death\\_investigation\\_centers\\_-\\_construction\\_staffing\\_and\\_costs.pdf](https://www.nist.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2018/04/25/swgmdi_regional_medicolegal_autopsy_and_death_investigation_centers_-_construction_staffing_and_costs.pdf)

<sup>n</sup> Available from: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/228091.pdf>.

<sup>o</sup> Available from: [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/NSTC/strengthening\\_the\\_medicolegal\\_death\\_investigation\\_system\\_final.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/NSTC/strengthening_the_medicolegal_death_investigation_system_final.pdf).

<sup>p</sup> Available from: [https://www.nist.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2018/04/25/swgmdi\\_workplace\\_locations\\_of\\_board\\_certified\\_forensic\\_pathologists\\_in\\_the\\_us\\_who\\_perform\\_medicolegal\\_autopsies.pdf](https://www.nist.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2018/04/25/swgmdi_workplace_locations_of_board_certified_forensic_pathologists_in_the_us_who_perform_medicolegal_autopsies.pdf).



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