

**Medicolegal Death Investigation:
Terms and Definitions**



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Medicolegal Death Investigation: Terms and Definitions

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Foreword

The Medicolegal Death Investigation Subcommittee of the Organization of Scientific Area Committees determined that there was variation in the terms and definitions relevant to medicolegal death investigation. This document standardizes the terms and definitions to promote consistency across disciplines and jurisdictions.

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Medicolegal Death Investigation: Terms and Definitions

1 Scope

This technical document provides the terms and definitions for use in standards development in the medicolegal death investigation community in the United States. The list of terms included in this document are fundamental to medicolegal death investigation and associated standards; it is not meant to be exhaustive.

2 Terms and Definitions

2.1

accreditation

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

2.2

accident (manner of death)

Unexpected or unforeseen death due to injury without intent to harm or cause death.

2.3

autopsy

Postmortem diagnostic medical procedure conducted by a pathologist or other specially trained medical personnel, consisting of external and internal examination of a decedent, and may include other ancillary tests.

2.4

cause of death

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

2.5

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.

2.6

chief medicolegal officer

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

2.7

certified medicolegal death investigator

Medicolegal death investigator who has completed the requirements for Certification (Registry or Board) by an accredited credentialing body; currently American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators.

2.8

coroner

An elected or appointed official responsible for overseeing medicolegal death investigations, usually for a single county, and for certifying the cause and manner of death in these investigations; duties vary based on local enabling statutes.

2.9

could not be determined (manner of death)

(see 2.37 undetermined)

2.10

death certificate

A permanent document, registered with the vital records office, that states the identification, fact of death, cause of death, and manner of death; a source of mortality statistics.

2.11

death scene

Location or site at which a death is pronounced, and at which the decedent's body is located. This need not be the same location as the incident scene.

2.12

decedent

Deceased person or any suspected human remains.

2.13

external examination

Diagnostic medical procedure conducted by a pathologist or other specially trained medical personnel that consists of physical inspection of the decedent without internal examination; can include ancillary tests.

2.14

external evaluation

Physical assessment of the decedent by a medicolegal death investigator.

2.15

forensic autopsy

Autopsy authorized by law and typically performed under the jurisdiction of chief medicolegal officer for criminal justice, civil, and/or public health purposes.

2.16

forensic pathologist

Physician who is board-certified in forensic pathology by an accredited credentialing body; currently American Board of Pathology and American Osteopathic Board of Pathology.

2.17

forensic pathology

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 and manner of death.

2.18

homicide (manner of death)

Death as a result of a volitional act or act of omission (e.g., injury, poisoning, gross neglect of a child) committed by another person to cause fear, harm or death. Intent to cause death is a common element but is not required for use of the manner of homicide. The classification of homicide for the purposes of death certification is a “neutral” term and neither indicates nor implies criminal intent, which remains a determination within the province of legal processes.

2.19

hospital autopsy

Autopsy requested by a medical caretaker or healthcare facility, usually authorized by the next of kin.

2.20

incident scene

Location at which a fatal injury or fatal sequence of events was initiated. This may or may not be the death scene.

2.21

jurisdiction

(1) Legal authority to make legal decisions and judgments regarding a death, including performance of autopsy, as well as investigation and certification of cause and manner of death.

(2) Geographic area in which a medical examiner or coroner’s authority applies.

2.22

manner of death

Classification system based on the circumstances under which death occurred and any available postmortem findings, as known to the MDI authority at the time of certification; usually consists of accident, homicide, natural, suicide, and undetermined. Manner of death classification is a statutory function of the medicolegal death investigation authority, as part of death certification for purposes of vital statistics and public health, and does not imply a legal or judicial conclusion.

2.23

medical examiner

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.

2.24

medicolegal death investigation

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.

2.25

medicolegal death investigation authority

Person or persons whose duty it is to perform medicolegal death investigations for a designated jurisdiction, and ensure certification of cause and manner of death; duties vary based on local enabling statutes.

2.26

medicolegal death investigation office

Physical location of an agency (usually a medical examiner or coroner office) with the authority to perform medicolegal death investigations.

2.27

medicolegal death investigation system

The statutorily established infrastructure (e.g., county coroner or state medical examiner) that exists to conduct medicolegal death investigations within a defined geographic area.

2.28

medicolegal death investigator

Individual who performs medicolegal death investigations, and includes those who have not completed the requirements for certification and is not certified.

2.29

natural (manner of death)

Death due solely to natural disease.

2.30

next of kin

Legally determined hierarchy of interested parties who have authority over the decedent.

2.31

postmortem examination

Examination of a decedent and associated information by specially trained medical personnel; this may include autopsy, external examination, ancillary tests, evaluation of circumstances, review of medical records and other contextual information.

2.32

private autopsy

Autopsy requested and authorized by next of kin.

2.33

registry certified medicolegal death investigator

Medicolegal death investigator who has completed the requirements for Registry certification by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators or equivalent.

2.34

suicide (manner of death)

Death resulting from a volitional, self-inflicted act.

2.35

undetermined (manner of death)

Manner of death used when the information pointing to one manner of death is no more compelling than another when the circumstances surrounding the death are unknown.

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