



D48 The Role of the Forensic Nurse Death Investigator

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the role of forensic nurse death investigators, their educational foundation, and training and why their employment is a natural development in medical examiner and coroner systems.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating the totality of information forensic nurses provide to medical examiners and coroners in death investigations.

This presentation will outline the role of nurse death investigators, their educational foundation and training and why their employment is a natural development in medical examiner and coroner systems. Medical legal death investigation is comprised of four aspects: scene investigation, medical history, social history and the autopsy. (Fowler—personal communication) Forensic nurses are essential personnel providing vital evaluations to medical examiners and coroners that will determine the manner of death in all types of cases. The legal responsibilities of the nurse death investigator includes knowledge of state statutes, autopsy regulations, tissue and organ procurement, court testimony and legal documentation.

The number of forensic nurses working as death investigators is increasing throughout medical examiner's offices and coroner's jurisdictions worldwide. In some states, medical examiner's offices are hiring nurses as part of the investigative team and in other jurisdictions nurses are being elected as coroners. Nurses aren't only practitioners with strong backgrounds in bioscience; they also possess advanced medical and scientific expertise. Knowledge and training in medical terminology, pharmacology and pathology and the law are necessary when investigating the scene of untimely death. This applied knowledge steers the investigation when the forensic nurse interfaces with professional counterparts representing the disciplines of forensic science and law enforcement. The nurse correlates clinical findings and interprets the body's response.

Quality frontline investigation techniques are critical to the death investigation system. Contemporary death investigation systems acknowledge the importance of a functional multidisciplinary structure to achieve decisive death investigations. The nurse is a notable professional having the ability to objectively assess the medical, social and scientific background of the deceased. Nurses apply effective assessment skills, recognition and documentation of injuries, and patterns of injury useful in determining the cause and manner of death.

The correlation of the history taking: medical, psychiatric, social and occupational facilitates the investigator in the development of the sequence of events leading to the death of the decedent. Correlating this basic information with the findings noted on the body aids in the determination for further investigative efforts.

Nurses retain the ability to decode the medical record, a valuable resource of critical historical information. They also project objectivity during the review of the medical record and are able to recognize inconsistencies.

An essential part of death investigation is the conduction of interviews with witnesses. Traditionally, nurses are good history takers because the general public trusts them. This assumed level of trust helps the nurse to gather information and facts in the course of an interview. Nurses project an image that is likely approachable, less intimidating and more calming than the image of typical law enforcement authorities. This helps build a rapport with witnesses that may be useful in followup interviews.

An experienced nurse with keen, clinical assessment skills may tune in to non-verbal cues during the course an interview. Such observations may help to facilitate or prompt further and necessary questioning. Forensic nurses are trained to apply a degree of suspicion when there are inconsistencies in statements made by witnesses and especially when those statements are inconsistent with findings at the scene. The application of critical thinking by the nurse is fundamental in the interpretation and communication of information in stressful situations when emotions frequently run high.

Nurses as forensic investigators obtain useful data to support interpretation of the scene. The combination of a thorough history and good crime scene processing guide the pathologist in the performance of the autopsy. This useful information will assist the medical examiner to focus on specific areas of interest. The medical examiner findings are disseminated to all members of the multidisciplinary team. The result is a comprehensive systematic and scientific death investigation.

Forensic Nurse, Death Investigators, Medical Examiners/Coroners