



D40 Forensic Autopsy Performance Standards - The Effect on Death Scene Investigation

Steven C. Clark, PhD*, Occupational Research and Assessment, 124 Elm Street, Big Rapids, MI 49307

After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to identify the medicolegal death investigator's role in the performance of the forensic autopsy. If the proposed NAME forensic autopsy performance standards are adopted and followed by the performing pathologist, this presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating how the medicolegal death investigator may have a significant role to play in the successful implementation of the standards and the resulting forensic autopsy.

Beginning in March of 2003, the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) formed a subcommittee within their Inspection and Accreditation (I&A) committee to investigate the possibility of developing organizational standards for the performing of the "forensic" autopsy. The members of the subcommittee, known as the NAME Standards Committee, were nominated by the I&A committee members and selected by the NAME President based on; jurisdictional size, system type, and the willingness to participate in the year long study.

The initial literature review focused on the identification of existing practice standards for forensic pathologists and the establishment of a membership profile to determine survey-sampling procedures. Based on the diversity of the membership, the committee determined that the methodology required to create a set of "acceptable" forensic autopsy standards would require an "open" research approach that encouraged comment and discussion both within the committee, as well as the general membership. A census, rather than sampling strategy, would be used in attempts to involve the entire NAME membership in the process.

From the existing materials reviewed, four data gathering instruments were developed and administered to members of the committee to begin the process of identifying the essential components of the forensic autopsy. These initial survey instruments were completed by 16 (80%) of the standards committee members at the annual NAME meeting in September 2003. The data collected was used to develop the first set of "performances" associated with the forensic autopsy. Those performances edited into performance objectives and presented to the committee at the next meeting held in Atlanta, December 2003.

After multiple revisions, refinements and reorganizations by several of members via emails and third draft for the performance standards were ready for full committee review in February 2004. After another round of revisions the committee approved the content of the standards document for release as a survey. Using a five-point Likert scale ("strongly agree to strongly disagree") each member would be asked to indicate their level of agreement on 177 survey items. Both electronic and hardcopy version were developed and then deployed to all general and emeritus members in April 2004.

In late March, a postcard announcement was sent to all members informing of the pending survey and its importance. The following week the first of four electronic deployments of the survey began followed by non-respondent telephone contacts. Data collection stopped on June 3, 2004 with a total of 465 (60.3%) surveys returned. All survey data were compiled and presented to the committee final review and consideration at a 3-day meeting in Atlanta, June 7-9.

Of those returned, 438 (90.5%) were from members and 73 (9.5%) were from emeritus members. Members from 48 states and six countries participated in the research, with California and Florida have the highest number of respondents (50), and 38 (90.4%) of NAME accredited offices participated. Members listed as board certified in AP/CP/FP made up 61.2% (254) of all respondents, while participant work experience averaged over twelve years. Of the 177 performance standards presented in the survey, 169 (95.4%) received an average rating between 4.0 (agree) and 5.0 (strongly agree), and one item (0.06%) having a median score below 5.0. Overall, agreement (strongly agree and agree) on the survey was 89.9%. There were 21 (11.8%) of the performance standards that at least 10% (46) individuals disagreed with (disagree and strongly disagree). Of the total, 4.15% of the responses were rated as "unsure," while 1.2% received no response. In addition, over 2,200 comments were logged and categorized for committee review.

Summary: While reviewing the data presented for each standard (descriptive statistics and respondent comments), the committee debated the merits of each performance standard. To maintain the consensus methodology, the committee was reminded that if any one member did not agree with a specific standard, it would be removed. Based on review of the data and much discussion, 21 requirements were edited, four standard titles were modified, one new title was created, and 16 performance tasks were removed. The final set of proposed forensic autopsy standards consists of nine sections, 31 standards, and 153 performance tasks.

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