



D8 A Comparative Analysis of the Public Health Role of Death Investigation Systems

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The goal of this presentation is to educate the forensic community about various public health roles played by death investigation systems in a diverse state practicing under a single medical examiner law in which death investigation is politically separate and distinct from state and local Public Health Departments.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating preliminary results suggesting that the role of medical examiner/coroners in public health is more extensive than is widely recognized. Further, it appears that the instrument that has been developed to assess this role will be useful and applicable. Finally, mutual education of death investigators and public health officials of their respective roles will better serve the local community.

Public health is a broad term used to describe a system that takes an interdisciplinary approach to identify and prevent, promote and protect the safety of citizens within a community. Public health, similar to death investigation, is linked to governmental and political decision makers. The hypothesis underlying the current research is that death investigation is, in fact a public health function, regardless of the political alliance, or lack thereof, between the official entities. Conversely, public health departments rely heavily on data provided by medical examiner/coroners in order to assess, implement, and evaluate programs within communities. This reliance is widely recognized, although public health departments frequently do not understand the role of death investigators, and hence do not understand the limitations of the data thus derived. Regardless of political alliance, recognition of the mutually dependent roles and overlapping functions between these entities will serve the greater good of the community.

The ten essential roles of public health will be explored in depth throughout the presentation. In order to conduct this analysis, a standardized questionnaire addressing each of these roles was derived from the National Public Health Performance Standards, published by the federal Department of Health and Human Services. Specifically, questions were extracted from the Local Public Health System Performance Assessment Instrument component. Initial development and testing of this instrument involved face-to-face meetings with the local medical examiner (Harris County, Texas). Subsequently, questions were edited, revised, and amended to clarify their relevance to death investigation. Questionnaires were then mailed out to a representative sample of medical examiners and justices of the peace (equivalent to an elected coroner within this state) within Texas. Phone calls were implemented where necessary for clarification of specific points.

Initial findings were both expected and unexpected. It is widely known, for example that the local medical examiner (Harris County) plays an active role in child fatality reviews, disaster planning and in local trauma service morbidity/mortality conferences. The local medical examiner office also plays an active role in injury/violence prevention programs. An unexpected finding was that regulatory oversight of medical examiner offices and death investigation systems in this state are voluntary. Survey results will demonstrate a wide variability in the actual involvement in public health roles, and an even wider self-awareness of this involvement.

Our preliminary results suggest that the role of medical examiner/coroners in public health is more extensive than is widely recognized. Further, it appears that the instrument that has been developed to assess this role will be useful and applicable. Mutual education of death investigators and public health officials of their respective roles will better serve the local community.

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