



E16 The Medical Examiner in the 21st Century

Charles V. Wetli, MD, 2 Berkery Place, Alpine, NJ 07620-0398*

After attending this presentation, attendees will comprehend the functions and qualifications of medical examiners, be aware of their limitations, understand the necessity of independence from law enforcement, and be better equipped to examine and cross-examine the medical examiner.

The presentation will impact the forensic science community by making participants aware of the significance of office accreditation and the appropriate application of technological advances.

Medical Examiner Systems arose in the late nineteenth century from the Coroner System of England created centuries ago. In the first half of the twentieth century medical examiners were generally pathologists with varying degrees of training and experience. The development of formal training programs lead to formal board certification in forensic pathology, the creation of forensic nurses, and the creation and certification of medico-legal death investigators. Inspection and accreditation of medical examiner offices were also instituted. The momentum of these developments is being carried into the twenty first century, with board certification being a virtual requirement for the practice of forensic pathology, and more offices are seeking accreditation by the National Association of Medical Examiners. A few states have gone so far as to require all medical examiner offices to be so accredited. Medical examiner involvement in the procurement of organs and tissues for transplantation is becoming more frequent and commonplace as they are invited to be on advisory panels and provide input into the Uniform Anatomical Gift Act to facilitate functioning and communication with procurement agencies.

Attempts by law enforcement agencies to control, subjugate, or curtail medical examiner functions have been met with a great deal of resistance, and it is expected that medical examiners will continue to assert their independence by continuing to provide assistance to criminal defense attorneys as well as to prosecutors. In addition, there appears to be a trend to incorporate at least some, if not all, functions traditionally associated with crime laboratories to achieve independence, neutrality, and objectivity. The decisions and procedures of medical examiners are increasingly coming under legal scrutiny: from denial of organs and tissues for transplantation to conclusions expressed on death certificates, and the imputation of police actions in deaths occurring during police apprehension and arrest.

Technological advances are supplementing the low-tech autopsy: the use of DNA technology and application of radiological imaging techniques have proven to be helpful adjuncts. Serious problems are occurring with over-reliance on these techniques ("Virtopsy") and the generation of computerized autopsy reports.

Expect to see greater independence, more accountability, and more uniformity in death investigation and certification as advancing technology is incorporated into existing and future medical examiner systems.

Medical Examiner Systems, Forensic Pathology, Accreditation and Certification