



Pathology Biology Section - 2012

G116 Standards of Practice in Forensic Pathology — Initial Outcomes From a Training Program for Medical Examiners and Coroners

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be informed about a novel NIJ-sponsored medicolegal death investigation training program aimed at educating medical examiners and coroners (ME/Cs) in nationally established best practices and standards in forensic pathology. Additionally, attendees will learn about further training resources for implementing policies and guidelines based on those standards in their offices.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by alerting participants to the design of a NIJ sponsored regional training program intended to inform ME/Cs of current forensic pathology standards of practice and providing them with toolkits to translate the training into office-specific best practices and policies. Educating all ME/Cs in forensic autopsy practice standards is the first step in establishing national compliance with those standards. Adherence to standards of practice will create more uniformity and consistency across jurisdictions and improve the quality of death investigation. Dissemination of this training methodology has the potential to vastly improve the quality of ME/C services in the United States.

The National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) defines best practices for forensic pathologists, medical examiners, and coroners in the United States through their forensic autopsy performance standards and voluntary inspection and accreditation program, along with incorporating guidelines established by NIJ. Qualifications for ME/C vary, but the majority of these decision makers have little or no forensic pathology experience and lack the essential instruction their roles demand. Many ME/Cs are unfamiliar with NAME practice standards, resulting in substantial discrepancies in the quality and consistency of forensic pathology across jurisdictions. Additionally, many offices have no jurisdiction-specific policies concerning scene investigation, selection of cases for autopsy, record keeping, identification, or handling mass fatalities. The lack of awareness of and establishment of policies and practices negatively impacts criminal justice practice throughout the United States, as specifically noted in the National Academy of Sciences Report on forensic science.

In 2011, through a NIJ-sponsored grant, two training programs were developed in nationally established best practices and standards in death investigation for ME/C and death investigators. Feedback from the first session was used to augment the second training program. Topics included: standards in death investigation; standards in selecting cases falling under ME/C jurisdiction; investigative requirements; selection of cases for postmortem examinations; standards in forensic autopsies, autopsy reporting, documentation of significant postmortem examination findings; effective use of ancillary tests, forensic consultants, and support services during investigations and postmortem examinations; interpretation and the use of scientifically based opinions in death investigation; the unidentified body, and NamUs; mass fatality plans; scene and morgue safety; organ and tissue donation laws and organ procurement organizations; morgue operations; collection of evidence; chain of custody procedures; sexual assault and bite mark evidence; issues in toxicology, specimen collection, and interpretation of results; personnel and staffing of the ME/C office; laboratory requirements, reports, and record keeping; annual reports; computerized storage options; and accurate death certificate completion.

Beyond educating the trainees regarding best practices for forensic pathology, the training program provides participants with an extensive take-home *Toolkit* of materials, including modifiable generic policies and forms for implementation in their local jurisdictions. A website was developed that also contains the toolkit materials and other resources, as well as the opportunity to submit questions regarding policies to forensic pathologists from a NAME accredited office. Further, feedback on the needs and concerns of the trainees regarding their ability to put best practices into place, particularly given the very different problems and needs each ME/C office faces based on their location, the population size serviced, and available resources was used to improve the program. Finally, post-training changes in ME/C policies and practices with regard to incorporating NAME standards was explored and documented.

Although recommendations to improve the ME/C system have been made in the past, to our knowledge, this is the first training program that gathered together key forensic pathology decision makers, trained them in best practices and standards for death investigation based on forensic pathology practice standards, and supported them (via website and peer-coaching) in effecting change and quality improvements. It also uniquely provides the ME/Cs with template policies, procedures, and forms, as a *Toolkit* to allow easy implementation of policies in line with forensic pathology practice standards.

Best Practices for ME/Cs, NAME Standards, Medical Examiner/ Coroner Offices Training