



D24 Medicolegal Deaths Requiring On-Scene Investigation

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how the death investigator will be able to identify which death scenes (by suspected Manner of Death/Cause of Death (MOD/COD) type) require on-scene investigation.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by increasing awareness of the inconsistency across the United States as to which death scenes get on-site investigation by the medicolegal agency (medical examiner/coroner) in charge of the case.

Statement of Problem: Although each state has statutes denoting the types of cases that need to be reported to, and “investigated” by, the Medical Examiner’s or Coroner’s (ME/C) office, there is variability across medicolegal jurisdictions as to the definition of “investigated.” This variability may range from an investigative “review” of basic case information conducted via telephone to an “on-scene” investigation conducted by a medicolegal death investigator for the same type of death. This investigative inconsistency results in medicolegal investigations of inconsistent quality, which can impact the quality of forensic autopsies and death certification. To determine the type of death scene investigation recommended for different (death) scenarios, this study conducted a “case-based” interactive web-based survey of medicolegal death investigators.

Methods: The survey population included active members of the International Association of Coroners & Medical Examiners (IAC&ME), the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME), the Society of Medicolegal Death Investigators (SOMDI), and those certified by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI) (n=2,392). To identify which case “types” would most likely require “on-scene” investigation, this study developed an automated case “scenario generator” that created unique scenarios based on combinations of six randomly selected categories of case variables (cause and manner of death, witnessed event, age, death location, and body) for evaluation by survey participants. Each category included a set of choices that typically apply to the category (e.g., witnessed: yes/no). After removing combinations that would produce “unlikely” scenarios (e.g., manner=suicide, age=infant, etc.), the six categories and their associated choices (n=45) yielded a total of 9,987 unique case scenarios. Case scenarios were compiled and presented at random to survey participants in systematic groupings of ten cases by age group, each group of ten containing a fixed number of cases by age (one infant, one child, one teenager, four adults, and three elderly).

Results: A total of 468 individual respondents (20% of potential respondents) evaluated a total of 24,352 case scenarios. Preliminary analysis identified six MOD/COD combinations, one body location, and three age categories (e.g., infant to 12 years) that, regardless of all other variables involved in a case, played a significant role in the survey participants’ decisions to conduct an on-scene investigation.

Conclusions: Using consensus-seeking methods, standard criteria can be used to determine if on-scene investigation is advised.

Death, Scene, Investigation