



E17 A Continuing Need — Certification of Medicolegal Death Investigation Personnel

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to identify the various job titles used by medicolegal agencies (medical examiner, coroner, justice of the peace) nationally to describe the employment of individuals to perform medicolegal death investigation as well as the various educational methods available to individuals seeking employment as medicolegal death investigators.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by showing how each participant in the investigation of death, either directly as scene investigators or indirectly as forensic consultants and educators, should understand the career tracks and educational methods used by medicolegal death investigators.

Medicolegal jurisdictions vary widely across the United States and include medical examiner (county, state or district), coroner (appointed or elected), justice of the peace, and sheriff-coroner systems. Each agency has some level of statutory authority to investigate multiple types of sudden and unexpected death. The educational preparation and certification requirements of the individuals responsible for performing these medicolegal investigations also varies. Many systems are fraught with inconsistent practices associated with leadership changes (i.e., elections) and budget restrictions and are often underfunded and understaffed.¹

To better understand the educational variability that exists in the field of medicolegal death investigation, a cursory literature review was performed to identify common “job titles” used to describe employment positions held by individuals who work for or with medicolegal agencies. The literature review produced a list of 38 job titles for forensic positions that participate in overall medicolegal investigation of death. A survey was deployed to members of the three organizations identified as the primary employers of medicolegal death investigators in the United States: the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI), the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IACME), and the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME). The survey was designed to identify the educational requirements possessed by individuals holding job titles associated with medicolegal death investigation. The results appeared to indicate that medicolegal death investigator positions encompass numerous duties, requiring skills associated with various other job titles including office administrator, data analyst, crime scene investigator, evidence technician, photographer, social worker, counselor, and more.

A United States Department of Justice (USDJO) expert panel on medicolegal death investigation concluded that death investigators must be educated and trained to properly determine the scope and extent of the death investigation and ensure quality for each investigation.¹ The medicolegal investigation differs from the criminal investigation and its results impact both public health and public safety, therefore emphasizing the need for standardized certification of medicolegal personnel. The multitude of job titles suggests a lack of standardized academic preparation for employment as a medicolegal death investigator. In addition, the education level of medicolegal death investigations nationally ranges from a high school diploma (coupled with various on-the-job training activities) to post-graduate degrees in medicine, anthropology, dentistry, and the law.

Numerous undergraduate and graduate forensic science programs exist across the country, although there are few programs specifically designed for medicolegal death investigation. The training courses available in forensic science range from basic on-the-job training (job shadowing) offered by hiring agencies to specialized training to perform specific investigative tasks (i.e., bloodstain pattern analysis, trace, hair or fiber analysis; entomology, etc.). Training is delivered through various methods including traditional classroom, laboratory, internships, mentorships, and hybrid online courses, which may include hands-on training and field experience. Training is offered by colleges, universities, consultants, medicolegal agencies, and professional organizations, but there is an absence of established criteria for content quality and training outcomes. Content delivery is variable, dependent upon the experience and competency of the trainers who are typically non-educators.

Certification ensures that an individual has demonstrated a recognized level of proficiency in the standards associated with the job title and establishes a basic standard of knowledge for a profession. An independent certification body verifies that an individual has achieved a recognized level of proficiency regardless of the educational methodology, agency, or organization offering the training. Certification can provide direction for education providers and instill confidence in hiring agencies who seek individuals that have verified prerequisite job knowledge and established professional knowledge including adherence to a code of ethics and continuing education.



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There are numerous obstacles to ensuring that medicolegal death investigators are properly educated, trained, and certified. Funding is probably the largest obstacle, especially for small, rural medicolegal offices. Federal or state funding to assist in defraying costs associated with certification and training through existing or new grant programs would be advantageous.

Reference(s):

1. Scientific Working Group on Medicolegal Death Investigation (SWGMDI) Report and Recommendation for Certification of Medicolegal Investigative Personnel. December 2013. <http://swgmdi.org/images/ACET3.PRC10.RecommendationCertificationMDIPersonnel.Published.6.5.14.pdf>. Accessed 06.30.15.

Certification, Training, Medicolegal Agencies