



H68 The Redevelopment of the Mississippi State Medical Examiner's Office

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The goal of this presentation is to reveal how the development of a structured state medical examiner system has improved medicolegal death investigations throughout the state of Mississippi.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating how a structured medical examiner system has improved the quality of the forensic pathology services throughout the state of Mississippi.

For more than 30 years, Mississippi contracted with non-board-certified pathologists to provide autopsy services to coroners, law enforcement, and district attorneys to assist them with medicolegal death investigations. This arrangement resulted in numerous false convictions leading to appeals. Many cases were reopened and overturned due to the efforts of the Mississippi Innocence Project.

The core of the problem was untrained and unsupervised pathologists tailoring their reports and testimony to support the expectations of law enforcement and district attorneys in order to obtain convictions. The majority of the examinations were performed in local funeral homes with substandard facilities. This deficiency compromised documentation of findings, collection of evidence, and chain of custody. Further, two independent pathologists reportedly performed a total of approximately 1,800 autopsies per year under these conditions. This total is unfeasible given the complexity involved in cause- and manner-of-death determinations.

The state of Mississippi finally recognized the need for a structured state medical examiner's system. In an attempt to rectify the issue with non-board-certified forensic pathologists, the state contracted with an adjacent state's medical examiner's office; this situation was terminated following unsatisfactory fulfillment of the contractual agreement.

Since 2011, Mississippi has hired only physicians who are board-certified in forensic pathology by the American Board of Pathology. A new facility was constructed in 2015 to jointly house the Mississippi crime laboratory and the medical examiner's office. The state-of-the-art facility contains four autopsy stations, each with its own 55" monitor for viewing digital radiographs and entering case information into an evidence-tracking database program. The physical continuity between the medical examiner's office and the state crime lab allows immediate access to multidisciplinary services, such as toxicology, firearms and ballistics, trace evidence, fingerprinting, and DNA analysis. Although a satellite office on the Gulf Coast remains unstaffed, the facility is sufficiently equipped to accommodate regional demands.

The medical examiner's office consults with a board-certified forensic odontologist, an arrangement which has facilitated numerous dental identifications. The office also recently hired two forensic anthropologists who are developing a statewide skeletal recovery and identification program.

While the quality and continuity of autopsy services has dramatically improved, there is a continual battle regarding funding and staffing issues.

Mississippi, State Medical Examiner, FP Board Certification