



### H147 Mississippi Organ and Tissue Recovery in High-Profile Medical Legal Cases

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand organ, eye, and tissue recovery outcomes in a state with an exceptionally high homicide and infant mortality rate utilizing a mixed coroner/medical examiner system.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science community by presenting the results of organ and tissue recovery and transplantation along with the autopsy results with respect to three medical examiner cases.

Since the development and opening of the Mississippi Organ Recovery Agency (MORA) in 1994, a common mindset among coroners regarding homicides, high-profile cases, or infant fatalities had been that donation and recovery of organs and tissues prevented accurate investigation and postmortem findings. This was due to a lack of coroner understanding regarding recovery and postmortem examination procedures. This misunderstanding continued throughout the state for nearly 20 years, which resulted in numerous families robbed of the opportunity to give the Gift of Life and/or honor the wishes of their loved one who had signed the donor registry, a legally binding, first-person authorization.

In 2017, the Office of the State Medical Examiner (OSME) of Mississippi and MORA began to develop protocols regarding the risks and benefits of organ and tissue recovery with respect to medicolegal cases. These protocols followed state statutes in addition to guidelines set by the National Association of Medical Examiners. These protocols reflected the state statutes regarding the responsibilities of the coroners throughout the state. These protocols have been successful in educating coroners and increasing their knowledge that organ and tissue recovery does not preclude an accurate medicolegal investigative process.

Over the past few years, MORA has been able to recover many medicolegal cases, ranging from high-profile homicides, unnatural infant fatalities, and unique circumstantial deaths. Recovery and donation performed by MORA has never disrupted or compromised an investigation in the state of Mississippi. This success has resulted in hundreds of families being able to turn their tragedy into a positive outcome, as well as thousands of lifesaving and healing gifts transplanted to those in need. This positive outcome is due to the support of the OSME and the collaborative protocols put into effect by all three agencies (i.e., MORA, OSME, and coroners). As a result of these protocols, the number of cases shut down by a coroner have decreased by nearly 100%. MORA and the OSME plan to continue these collaborative protocols and share the results of the successful donation outcomes combined with successful medicolegal investigations and prosecutions that were not affected by the recovery of organs, eyes, and/or tissues for the purpose of transplantation or research.

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**Transplantation, Medical Legal, Collaborative**