

H124 Conflict of Interest in the California Coroner or Sheriff-Coroner Systems

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of the California coroner's, sheriff-coroner's, medical examiner's, and forensic pathologist's role in medical-legal death investigations and if any conflict of interest is perceived by these professionals.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by determining if the beliefs of those currently working in the California death investigation systems indicate a potential for conflict of interest in coroner or sheriff-coroner systems compared to medical examiner systems.

Introduction: In California, there are 58 counties with a mixture of death investigations systems. Only four counties utilize a medical examiner system that is a separate office from law enforcement. Los Angeles County employs a medical examiner and a coroner system. There are four counties that utilize a coroner system and the remaining 49 utilize a sheriff-coroner system. In coroner and sheriff-coroner systems, a forensic pathologist or physician who is not trained in forensic pathology performs the autopsy and determines cause and manner of death, and the coroner or sheriff-coroner signs the death certificate. However, the coroner or sheriff-coroner can change the manner of death regardless of what the forensic pathologist determines in his or her death investigation. Because a separate medical examiner system is expensive and probably not warranted in counties with smaller populations and budgets, in these counties the duties of signing death certificates are given to the coroner or sheriff-coroner, elected officials, who do not need to be a licensed physician per California law.

Methodology: To collect the responses of professionals in the death investigation field, an electronic survey was created and emailed to coroners, sheriff-coroners, medical examiners, and forensic pathologists. Demographic information was obtained as well as the respondent's beliefs in regard to a potential conflict of interest, in general, in the case of officer-involved shootings and in-custody deaths or deaths at time of arrest. Statistical analysis was completed to compare the survey responses regarding conflict of interest and correlation with their job titles. Chi square analysis was also used with the demographic data collected from the survey to determine if there were any significant difference in these variables that may have impacted the opinions of the respondents.

Results and Conclusions: Of the 78 recruiting emails sent to email addresses collected, 35% were returned. California utilizes predominately sheriff-coroner systems, the majority of responses were from counties that employ sheriff-coroner systems. Medical examiner systems were not represented as much. Of the responses returned, there is no conflict of interest in coroner or sheriff-coroner systems. There was no correlation between age, gender, years in profession, and highest level of education and the respondent's opinions. Age and gender had significant different results indicating that these variables may have had an impact on the opinions regarding potential conflict of interest in the California death investigation systems.

Coroner or Sheriff-Coroner Systems, Death Investigation, Conflict of Interest