

Questions and Answers

WHAT ARE THE DUTIES OF A COUNTY CORONER

Duties of the coroner include:

1. IDENTIFICATION of the deceased;
2. Determination of the CAUSE of death; and
3. Determination of the MANNER of death.

IDENTIFICATION may be as easy as having a family member at the scene when you get there or as difficult as having only a few bones to work with and having to utilize one of the many experts available to your coroner.

CAUSE of death is the final factor or event that happened to the deceased. If this had not happened, the individual would still be alive. This may be a cascade of factors or events, one following the other and this will be reflected on the death certificate that your coroner files with the county health department

As an example:

- A. asphyxia (inability to breathe), due to
- B. chest compression, due to
- C. settling of automobile, due to
- D. failure of jacking apparatus.

This group of factors is referred to as the mechanism, which lead to the asphyxia, which is the cause of death.

MANNER of death is a descriptive grouping. It is, however, a firmly set, universally accepted acknowledgement of how people die. These possibilities are:

- A. homicide;
- B. suicide;
- C. accident;
- D. natural; and
- E. undetermined.

WHAT TYPE OF CASES DOES A CORONER INVESTIGATE?

Coroners investigate:

- Homicides;
- Suicides;
- Crashes;
- Death by natural causes;
- Inmate deaths or cases in which cause of death originated while deceased was incarcerated;
- Deaths caused by diseases that may be public health threats;
- Deaths of people whose bodies are to be cremated, buried at sea, transported out of state or otherwise unavailable for pathological study; and
- Deaths of transplant surgery donors that are the result of some type of trauma.
- The vast majority of coroner investigations are natural deaths, including situations in which there is no attending physician to sign the death certificate, sudden or unexpected deaths, or cases involving alcohol or other drugs of abuse.

What is a death investigation?

What appears to be a natural death may be criminal; an apparent suicide may actually be an accidental death; and a natural death may reveal serious implications for survivors. Because of criminal, civil and public health implications, your coroner must treat every death carefully.

Upon first learning that a person in the county has died from violence, casualty, unusual circumstances, suspicious activity or while in apparently good health, the coroner will notify a local law enforcement agency. Together, they investigate the scene. Often, the coroner must restrict access to the death scene in order to properly carry out the investigation. Indiana's county coroners do not need the family's permission to conduct an investigation, but do hasten to complete their investigations so that the family may grieve in peace.

Proper documentation of the death scene is critical to the coroner's determination. Knowingly failing to notify the coroner or a law enforcement agency in the case of a death that qualifies as a coroner's investigation is a Class B infraction punishable by a fine up to \$1,000 plus court costs. Moving a body under these conditions is a Class D felony, punishable by imprisonment for up to three years and a fine of up to \$10,000.

Why are autopsies performed?

If no determination of death can be reasonably made based on case history and medical records, the Coroner may request an autopsy be performed to determine cause of death. Autopsies are examinations, both external and internal of a deceased person's body. The results may be helpful in

preventive measures for other living family members to determine inherited or genetic disease. (An autopsy is also performed on all fire deaths, all criminal deaths, and the death of an infant and child.)

Who pays for the autopsy?

If the death is an out of hospital death and /or under suspicious circumstances, the Coroner will review the facts and MAY order an autopsy. This expense is paid for by the County. If, however the family is requesting an autopsy state statute states that the party requesting the autopsy is responsible for payment. Costs range from about \$2500 to \$5000 for a private autopsy.

Who Performs the Autopsy?

In the state of Indiana, an autopsy can only be performed by a Board Certified Pathologist. In Howard County, we use the services of a board certified forensic pathologist. The autopsy is performed at the request of the Coroner.

Can I get a copy of the autopsy report?

An autopsy report is an investigative record. It can only be released to the legal next-of-kin or an insurance company who has a claim arising from the death per IC 36-2-14-18.

Can I come see my loved one?

Due to legal and health issues, visitation of a loved one is done only at a funeral home of the family's choice.

What information is released by the coroner?

Public information that must be released upon request, Section 36-2-14-18 of the Indiana Code says that the coroner is required to make available for public inspection and copying the following information:

- Name, age, race and address of the deceased
- Address where body was found
- Name of agency to which death was reported
- Name of person reporting death
- Name of public official or government employee present at the death scene
- Name of person certifying death
- Information regarding an autopsy, if performed, limited to the date, the person who performed the autopsy, where it was performed, and a conclusion as to (a) the probable cause, (b) the probable manner, and (c) the probable mechanism.
- Location to which body was removed.

How long does it take to determine the cause of death?

When the cause of death is dependent upon the pathologist's study and lab tests, four to six (4-6) weeks or more may be necessary. Also, the Coroner is dependent at times on information gathered by the Law Enforcement Agency of Jurisdiction to aid them in their investigation as to the manner and

mechanism of death. Careful documentation gives the prosecutor the needed documentation that is needed for successful prosecution in criminal cases. Also, insurance companies depend on these facts in order to pay proper death benefits.

How do I obtain death certificates?

Death Certificates are issued by the Vital Records Division of the Board of Health. Your funeral director you select will assist you with this process. The Coroner only signs the death certificate as it pertains to the cause, manner, and mechanism of death.

What do I do if a loved one passes away at home?

Call 911. A police officer and the coroner will be dispatched to your residence to investigate the death and assist you. If you are not sure if the subject is deceased-- paramedics will also be dispatched. While you are waiting it is extremely helpful if you can gather the decedent's medications and determine their last visit to the doctor. Locate any DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) forms for EMS and the Coroner. Locate your loved one's Doctor's phone number.