

OSAC 2022-N-0026 Medicolegal Death Investigation: Terms and Definitions

*Medicolegal Death Investigation
Medicine Scientific Area Committee
Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) for Forensic Science*





Draft OSAC Proposed Standard

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1 **Medicolegal Death Investigation:**
2 **Terms and Definitions**

3 **Foreword**

4 The Medicolegal Death Investigation Subcommittee of the Organization of Scientific Area
5 Committees determined that there was variation in the terms and definitions relevant to
6 medicolegal death investigation. This document standardizes the terms and definitions to
7 promote consistency across disciplines and jurisdictions.
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16 **Keywords:** *medicolegal death investigation, coroner, medical examiner*

19 **Abstract:** This technical document provides the standardization of terms and definitions used in
20 standards development in the medicolegal death investigation community. The use of
21 standardized terminology in the medicolegal death investigation community promotes
22 consistency across jurisdictions and relieves the judicial system of conflicting terms and
23 definitions.

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28 **Medicolegal Death Investigation: Terms and Definitions**

29 **1. Scope**

30 This technical document provides the standardization of terms and definitions used in standards
31 development in the medicolegal death investigation community. The use of standardized
32 terminology in the medicolegal death investigation community promotes consistency across
33 jurisdictions and relieves the judicial system of conflicting terms and definitions. The list of
34 terms included in this document are fundamental to medicolegal death investigation and
35 associated standards, it is not meant to be exhaustive. Some terms as defined in this document
36 may be used with different meanings in other disciplines.

37
38 **2. Normative References**

39 The references used for these terms and definitions can be found in the OSAC Lexicon
40 <https://www.nist.gov/osac/osac-lexicon>

41
42 **3. Terms and Definitions**

43 **3.1**

44 **accreditation**

45 Formal recognition by an independent accreditation body that a medicolegal system, office,
46 or agency meets or exceeds a prescribed set of standards

47
48 **3.2**

49 **accident (manner)**

50 Unexpected or unforeseen death due to injury

51
52 **3.3**

53 **autopsy**

54 Diagnostic medical procedure consisting of postmortem external examination, internal
55 examination, and other ancillary tests of a decedent; conducted by a pathologist

56
57 **3.4**

58 **biospecimen**

59 Any biological specimen derived from a decedent

60
61 **3.6**

62 **cause of death**

63 Medical opinion of the disease or injury that resulted in a person's death

64
65 **3.7**

66 **certification**

67 Procedure by which a third party gives written assurance that a person, product, process, or
68 service conforms to specific requirements (ISO/IEC Guide 2:2016)

69

70 **3.8**

71 **chief medicolegal officer**

72 Medical examiner, coroner, justice of the peace or other official who oversees the operation
73 of a medicolegal death investigation office and/or system.

74

75 **3.9**

76 **certified medicolegal death investigator**

77 Medicolegal death investigator who has completed the requirements for Certification
78 (Registry or Board) by an accredited credentialing body, currently American Board of
79 Medicolegal Death Investigators

80

81 **3.10**

82 **coroner**

83 Elected or appointed official whose duty is to oversee medicolegal death investigations,
84 usually for a single county, and ensure certification of cause and manner of death; duties vary
85 based on local enabling statutes

86

87 **3.11**

88 **could not be determined (manner)**

89 (see **3.37 undetermined**)

90

91 **3.12**

92 **death certificate**

93 Formal vital statistics document certifying the identification, cause and manner of death of a
94 particular individual

95

96 **3.13**

97 **death scene**

98 Location or site at which a death is pronounced, and at which the decedent's body is
99 located. This may or may not be the same location as the incident scene

100

101 **3.14**

102 **decedent**

103 Deceased person or any suspected human remains

104

- 105 **3.15**
106 **external examination**
107 Diagnostic medical procedure consisting of physical inspection and ancillary tests of the
108 decedent without internal examination, conducted by a pathologist
109
110 **3.16**
111 **external evaluation**
112 Physical assessment of the decedent by a medicolegal death investigator
113
114 **3.17**
115 **forensic autopsy**
116 Autopsy authorized by law, and typically performed under the jurisdiction of a medical
117 examiner or coroner for criminal justice and public health purposes
118
119 **3.18**
120 **forensic pathologist**
121 Physician who is board-certified in forensic pathology by an accredited credentialing body,
122 currently American Board of Pathology and American Osteopathic Board of Pathology
123
124 **3.19**
125 **forensic pathology**
126 Practice of medicine in which the principles of pathology are applied to problems of potential
127 legal, public health, or public safety significance; a common function is the performance of
128 autopsies to determine the cause and manner of death
129
130 **3.20**
131 **homicide (manner)**
132 Death as a result of a volitional act committed by another person (e.g. injury, poisoning). The
133 classification of homicide does not necessarily indicate that a crime was committed
134
135 **3.21**
136 **hospital autopsy**
137 Autopsy requested by a medical caretaker or healthcare facility, usually authorized by the
138 next-of-kin
139
140 **3.22**
141 **incident scene**
142 Location at which a fatal injury or fatal sequence of events happened. This may or may not
143 be the same location as where the death was pronounced

144

145 **3.23**

146 **jurisdiction**

147 (1) Legal authority to make legal decisions and judgments regarding a death, including
148 performance of autopsy, as well as investigation and certification of cause and manner of
149 death.

150 (2) Geographic area in which a medical examiner or coroner's authority applies

151

152 **3.24**

153 **manner of death**

154 Classification system based on the circumstances under which death occurred; includes
155 accident, homicide, natural, suicide, and undetermined

156

157 **3.25**

158 **medical examiner**

159 Appointed forensic pathologist whose duty is to oversee medicolegal death investigations,
160 perform postmortem examinations, and certify cause and manner of death. In some
161 jurisdictions, individuals with other qualifications hold the title "Medical Examiner", but for
162 purposes of this document those individuals are considered medicolegal death investigators

163

164 **3.26**

165 **medicolegal death investigation**

166 Formal inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of a human being; investigative
167 information is considered with autopsy findings and adjunctive studies (if performed) to
168 determine the cause and manner of death

169

170 **3.27**

171 **medicolegal death investigation authority**

172 Person or persons whose duty it is to perform medicolegal death investigations for a
173 designated jurisdiction, and ensure certification of cause and manner of death; duties vary
174 based on local enabling statutes

175

176 **3.28**

177 **medicolegal death investigation office**

178 Physical location of an agency (usually a medical examiner or coroner office) with the
179 authority to perform medicolegal death investigations

180

181 **3.29**

182 **medicolegal death investigation system**

- 183 Varied jurisdictional structures used for medicolegal death investigations
184
185 **3.30**
186 **medicolegal death investigator**
187 Individual who has completed the requirements for Certification (Registry or Board) by an
188 accredited credentialing body or performs medicolegal death investigations
189
190 **3.31**
191 **natural (manner)**
192 Death due solely to natural disease
193
194 **3.32**
195 **next of kin**
196 Legally determined hierarchy of interested parties who have authority over the decedent
197
198 **3.33**
199 **postmortem examination**
200 Medical examination of a decedent; this may include autopsy, external examination,
201 evaluation of circumstances, review of medical records and other contextual information
202
203 **3.34**
204 **private autopsy**
205 Autopsy requested and authorized by next-of-kin
206
207 **3.35**
208 **registry certified medicolegal death investigator**
209 Medicolegal death investigator who has completed the requirements for Registry certification
210 by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators or equivalent
211
212 **3.36**
213 **suicide (manner)**
214 Death resulting from intentional/volitional self-inflicted act
215
216 **3.37**
217 **undetermined (manner)**
218 Manner of death used when the information pointing to one manner of death is no more
219 compelling than another
220