



SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP FOR
MEDICOLEGAL DEATH INVESTIGATION

Certification of Medicolegal Death Investigation Personnel

A Report and Recommendations

Prepared by the Accreditation, Certification, Education, and Training Committee of the Scientific Working Group for Medicolegal Death Investigation (SWGMDI)

Executive Summary

It is recommended that all primary personnel responsible for investigating deaths (coroners, medical examiners, and medicolegal death investigators) and the consultants and entities providing supportive services be certified by an accredited certifying body. Practitioners entering the field shall obtain certification within a reasonable time of employment and as soon as the employee is eligible per the requirements of the certifying agency.

Adherence to a code of ethics is paramount to public confidence in the forensic sciences including death investigation. The process of individual certification by an accredited certifying body and accreditation of the office or system does include an ethical component.

Medicolegal death investigators must be educated and trained so that they can properly determine the scope and extent of the death investigation and can ensure quality for each investigation. Medicolegal death investigations impact public health and public safety.

There are various obstacles to ensuring that forensic science personnel are properly educated, trained, and certified and that the entities that employ them are properly accredited. Funding is one of these obstacles. A vehicle must be established to enforce universal certification for personnel and accreditation for offices in order to enhance the integrity of forensic sciences and death investigation.

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INTRODUCTION

Recommendation seven of the National Research Council's (NRC) report, "Strengthening Forensic Science in the United States: A Path Forward", states that no person (public or private) shall be allowed to practice in a forensic science discipline or testify as a forensic science professional without relevant certification.¹ The NRC report stresses the need for accreditation, certification, education, and training for forensic practitioners and facilities. In addition, in April 2010, the National District Attorneys Association (NDAA) published a resolution to support initiatives that enhance forensic science, stating that "...the quality and reliability of such evidence will be further enhanced by requiring mandatory and enforceable certification of testifying forensic science experts, public and private, and therefore supports efforts to mandate same."² Certification is defined as applying to individuals, and accreditation is defined as applying to systems and offices that employ individuals.

BACKGROUND

Given the context of the NRC report, one must assume there is an identified deficiency, or lack of standardized academic rigor associated with employment in the forensic science community that includes medicolegal death investigation. To better understand the education currently required to hold employment as a medicolegal death investigator, a cursory literature review was conducted to identify common "job titles" that exist nationally for these positions. The literature review produced a list of 38 job titles for forensic practitioners who participate in overall death investigation. In addition, the committee conducted a survey of the membership of two professional organizations [International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IAC&ME) and the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME)] and individuals who were certified by the medicolegal death investigator certifying body [American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI)]. These entities represent many of the individuals who are currently practicing medicolegal death investigation in the United States. The survey addressed what educational requirements were required in order to work as a medicolegal death investigator and requested what job titles were held by those who performed these types of investigations. The information received from this inquiry assisted the committee in the formulation of the recommendations herein. The SWGMDI published the findings of the review and survey in November 2012 entitled "Accreditation, Certification, Education and Training Committee's Report of the Minimal Educational Requirements for Medicolegal Death Investigation System Personnel".³

The document of recommendations presented here focuses primarily on medicolegal death investigator personnel responsible for medicolegal death investigations falling under the jurisdiction of the coroner (elected or appointed) or medical examiner (county, district or state) or other systems including the Justice of the Peace, and the sheriff-coroner systems. While statutes define the authority in each jurisdiction, many systems are fraught with inconsistent practices that may be the result of frequent leadership changes (i.e., elections) and budget restrictions. As a result, many systems are underfunded and understaffed.

Accreditation establishes minimum standards to ensure quality of medicolegal death investigations and applies to systems and offices that employ individuals. Accreditation does not apply to individual practitioners, but it does require that personnel be trained and certified in their respective fields, thus ensuring that forensic personnel are knowledgeable.

Medicolegal system or office accreditation is achieved after a thorough review of published office policies and procedures, observed office practices, review of credentials held by forensic practitioners and includes quality assurance verifications of laboratory and ancillary disciplines that provide services to death investigation systems. Initial accreditation is established through an on-site inspection funded by the system or office, followed by annual reporting requirements and maintenance fees. Accreditation also incorporates adherence to a code of ethics, an essential component in forensic science. In November 2012, the ACET Committee published “Accreditation, Certification, Education and Training Committee’s Report of the Comparison of the NAME and the IAC&ME Accreditation Standards”⁴, which further outlines the process of accreditation.

Individual certification is conferred by an independent professional certification body, which recognizes that a practitioner has acquired specialized knowledge and demonstrated proficiency in the standards and practice necessary to properly perform job duties.⁵ Certification provides general confidence by identifying individuals who comply with established professional requirements. Included in the certification process is an assessment of education, training, and experience, and written testing in validated domains of knowledge. Certification also incorporates documentation of practical skills and adherence to a code of ethics. Continuing education is often required for maintenance of certification.

The two widely recognized and accredited certification bodies for personnel involved in performing death investigations are the American Board of Pathology (ABP) and the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI). The ABP provides for the certification of pathologists in anatomic pathology and in the subspecialty of forensic pathology. The ABMDI offers two levels of certification for personnel who conduct death investigations. Other personnel (i.e., autopsy technicians) who perform integral functions for medicolegal death investigation offices and systems do not currently have avenues for certification specific to their job title or duties.

The following boards and associations provide certification for some of the consultants and other entities providing services integral to death investigation:

- American Board of Criminalistics (ABC)
- American Board of Forensic Anthropology (ABFA)
- American Board of Forensic Document Examiners (ABFDE)
- American Board of Forensic Entomology (ABFE)
- American Board of Forensic Odontology (ABFO)
- American Board of Forensic Toxicologist (ABFT)
- American Board of Radiologists (ABR)
- Association of Firearm and Toolmark Examiners (AFTE)
- International Association for Identification (IAI)
- International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN)

The Forensic Specialties Accreditation Board (FSAB) was established in 2000 as an oversight board to ensure the quality of forensic science certification programs and to create uniformity in standards of the credentialing process to include proper credentials, valid testing methods, inclusion of organizational policy and procedures, continuing education, periodic recertification, and the inclusion of an ethics policy.

Professional membership organizations in medicine and the forensic science provide for and encourage the professional development of practitioners through proffered papers, authorship of journal articles, and interacting with other professionals.

CHALLENGES

There are various obstacles to ensuring that forensic science personnel are properly educated, trained and certified and that the entities that employ them are properly accredited.

Full-time employment is challenging for small offices and rural jurisdictions that may not have adequate funds or resources. Without full-time employment, practitioners may not be able to meet certification requirements in a timely manner, preventing facilities from becoming accredited or maintaining accreditation. While a solution to this may include encouraging flexibility in work experience requirements in order to qualify sooner for certification as a medicolegal death investigator, this may have a deleterious effect.

Funding of continuing education activities as required for maintenance of certification will continue to be a challenge for all medicolegal offices. It appears that the burden of personnel development and maintenance of certification requirements typically falls to the employer in larger jurisdictions and the individual in smaller jurisdictions. To ensure certification across all jurisdictional types and sizes, new strategies need to be investigated. The emergence of on-line educational exercises appears to be an affordable avenue; however, employers should exercise caution and ensure that the continuing education topic is in the area that is required for the employee's certification and meets recertification requirements of the certifying body.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that all primary personnel responsible for investigating deaths, and the consultants and entities providing supportive services, be certified by a qualified accrediting agency. Specifically, pathologists shall be certified by the American Board of Pathology in the subspecialty of forensic pathology. Medicolegal death investigators and those coroners, who are not board certified forensic pathologists, shall be certified as Diplomates by ABMDI, at a minimum. Other consultants shall be certified by a qualified professional accrediting entity.

In addition, it is recommended that an appropriate professional organization conduct a national needs assessment to evaluate additional job title certifications and once identified adopt FSAB's accreditation guidelines.

Employers shall ensure that new employees are required to achieve certification in their profession within a time frame consistent with an office's policies and procedures (i.e., probationary period).

Further, it is recommended that national work standards programs, such as the "Sudden Unexplained Infant Death" (SUID) Train-the-Trainer Program and "Death Investigation: A Guide for the Death Investigator", be continued to encourage consistent and standard performance of death investigation regardless of jurisdictional type or size.

It is recommended that the professional organizations representing those who participate in medicolegal investigation of death review their current accreditation standards and implement requirements for financial support for all staff members whose certifications require continuing education.

It is recommended that federal, state, and local agencies, including state-based medical examiner and coroner associations, continue to offer free and/or low cost continuing education opportunities for their members and others seeking continuing education. In addition, agencies should budget and schedule time to allow personnel to participate in these opportunities.

References

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