

# Wisconsin Coroners and Medical Examiners Association



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To the Manitowoc County Board of Supervisors:

As the President of the Wisconsin Coroners and Medical Examiners Association, I would like to clarify the roles and responsibilities of Coroners and Medical Examiners (C/MEs) and address some incorrect statements recently made to the media.

Under the Constitution of the State of Wisconsin, every county is required to have an elected Coroner or an appointed Medical Examiner. Several state statutes, most notably s. 979, address the legal duties and responsibilities of C/MEs to determine the cause of any death that falls under their legal jurisdiction. Such deaths include suicides, homicides, accidental deaths, and deaths from natural causes. Our responsibilities also include public health and safety, statistical data collection, and mass disaster preparedness.

A large percentage of the deaths we investigate are natural deaths that are unexpected or unexplained. The remaining cases are deaths due to unusual or suspicious circumstances: accidents, suicides, and homicides. Medicolegal death investigations require a solid foundation in medicine, crime scene investigation techniques and forensic science. In fact, almost all of the C/MEs in Wisconsin are medical or criminal justice professionals.

It is not cost-effective or realistic to autopsy every case, so the C/ME relies on his medical and forensic training to determine the cause of death. If necessary, the C/ME will request a forensic specialist to perform additional services, such as an autopsy or toxicology testing. The C/ME must then combine all the information into a legal record that documents the cause and manner of death. That often includes the legal death certificate. Physicians are not always available to sign the death certificate for their patients, and they are not allowed to sign if the death was not from natural causes. Insurance companies, government agencies, and the justice system rely on the results of our investigations. But our duties do not end with a written report.

The C/ME is often the primary contact for the grieving family looking for answers. This is the “heart” of what we do. It is often our responsibility to give someone the terrible news that a loved one is dead, but many times the family thanks us for doing that duty. Citizens take comfort from our personal touch, and reassurance from our explanations. For many of us, it is the human connection that makes this challenging career worth it.

C/MEs are professional medicolegal death investigators. Our duty is not limited to pronouncing death and removing the body. Our profession combines medical and forensic science to perform independent investigations into the cause and manner of death. The job we do everyday is one the average citizen doesn't even want to think about, but one that is necessary and important.

The C/ME in each county, whether elected or appointed, is a department head worthy of the same courtesy and respect due to any dedicated public servant working for the benefit of their fellow citizen. It is the mission of the Wisconsin Coroners and Medical Examiners Association to advance our profession through professional standards and training for our members.

Respectfully,

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