



The Hennepin County Medical Examiner

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Fast facts

- ▲ All deaths that are sudden or unexpected or occur from other than natural causes must be reported to the Medical Examiner.
- ▲ The Medical Examiner determines – Who is this person? Why did they die?
- ▲ Medical examiners are licensed physicians trained in the specialty of forensic pathology.
- ▲ The Medical Examiner received reports of approximately 3,600 deaths last year. About 20 percent of reported deaths result in autopsies.
- ▲ Fewer than 5 percent of cases investigated last year were homicides.

What does the Medical Examiner do?

The Hennepin County Medical Examiner provides death investigative and forensic autopsy services for deaths that occur under Hennepin jurisdiction. By law, all deaths that are sudden or unexpected or occur from other than natural causes must be reported to the Medical Examiner.

The Medical Examiner assists families, law enforcement agencies and the legal system by determining a scientifically unbiased and logical cause and manner of death. The information gathered during a forensic death investigation and subsequent autopsy can be critical in civil or criminal court cases.

The Medical Examiner received reports of approximately 3,600 deaths last year, and has the authority to decide if an autopsy is necessary in each case. Approximately 35 percent of reported deaths are determined to be within the Medical Examiner's jurisdiction, and about 20 percent of reported cases result in autopsies as part of the death investigation.

Approximately 40 percent of the cases investigated last year were natural deaths, and approximately 40 percent were accidental (motor vehicle crash, falls, drug overdose, etc.). Fewer than 5 percent were homicides.

What is a medical examiner?

Minnesota has both coroners and medical examiners, depending on the county. Coroners must be licensed physicians. Medical examiners are licensed physicians who also are trained in the specialty of forensic pathology.

The Hennepin County Medical Examiner is an independent entity and does not work for the County Attorney or any law enforcement agency. The Medical Examiner employs several assistant medical examiners (also licensed physicians trained in forensic pathology) and 12 medical examiner investigators – trained, experienced individuals who gather and interpret information to ensure that death investigations are unbiased, thorough and accurate.

Investigation and autopsy

Bodies are brought from a hospital or other location to the morgue – the area of the Medical Examiner's Office where bodies undergo examination.

Identifying the person is the first concern, so family and friends can be notified. The autopsy – an examination of the body to determine the cause and manner of death and assess any abnormalities – is performed by the Medical Examiner or an assistant medical examiner.

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- ▲ Providing information to the family is a critical function of the Medical Examiner.
- ▲ Basic demographic information and cause and manner of death are matters of public record under Minnesota law.

A complete forensic autopsy includes a review of the decedent's medical history. Small specimens (biopsies) of internal organs are examined and samples of body fluids tested for drugs and other substances. In deaths resulting from violence, other types of evidence may be collected and examined by a crime laboratory or other agency.

The autopsy generally takes place within one day, and other tests rarely delay the release of the body to next-of-kin. But in occasional cases, specialized microscopy or laboratory studies, including DNA analysis, are required, and the final autopsy results may not be available for several weeks.

Medical benefits provided by an autopsy include determination of the cause of death, uncovering unsuspected natural causes, identifying possible public health hazards, and sometimes identification of a hereditary medical condition.

Who has access to autopsy information?

Basic demographic information and cause and manner of death are matters of public record under Minnesota law. The rest of the information is confidential and treated similarly to medical records – available only to immediate next-of-kin, legal representatives of the decedent's estate, and treating physicians.

In cases of homicide, information can be provided only to law enforcement agencies investigating the death and the County Attorney, until the matter has made its way through the courts. The Medical Examiner is frequently called upon to testify in court about the findings of an autopsy.

How does the Medical Examiner help family and friends?

If a person dies in a hospital, hospital staff notify relatives. If the death occurs elsewhere, law enforcement or the Medical Examiner may notify family. Providing information to the family is a critical function of the Medical Examiner. The circumstances surrounding unusual deaths are often very difficult for loved ones to hear. Even in straightforward natural deaths, information from the death investigation may help surviving family members protect their own health.

Once the Medical Examiner determines the cause and manner of death, the State Registrar will issue the death certificate. A properly completed death certificate is usually necessary to claim insurance, receive government benefits, settle the decedent's estate, and pursue any civil or criminal legal action.

The Medical Examiner does not arrange or conduct funerals – that is done privately by family and friends. If there is no family, or the deceased is indigent and cannot pay for a funeral, the county may provide funeral and burial assistance.

When it's difficult to identify a victim, the experience can be frustrating and devastating for loved ones. Medical Examiner's staff go to extraordinary lengths to resolve cases – sometimes pursuing unresolved cases for years.