INVESTIGATIONS

Medico-legal investigations are completed in a professional, ethical and timely manner and they are geared to assist in the determination of the cause and manner of death. This is accomplished through the continued cooperation between the law enforcement agencies, health care professionals, and the public.

The initial phase of the process typically starts with a report of death. In 2010, Investigators processed 10,101 reports of death; Medical Examiner's Jurisdiction was invoked in 2,718 (27%) of those reports.

Investigators physically respond to the majority of the death scenes falling into the Medical Examiner Jurisdiction. In 2010, we responded to 1771 scenes (65%). An initial body and scene assessment is completed at the place of death, which can be virtually anywhere in the 4,261 square miles of San Diego County. Photographs are taken and relevant evidence is collected in order to assist in the investigation. The evidence may include weapons, biological specimens, medications, drugs, and drug paraphernalia. All the investigations are completed with a methodical and systematic approach and all the findings are documented in a comprehensive investigative report.

The Medical Examiner's investigators are the ones with the difficult task of notifying the next of kin of the death. The process starts with the identification of the decedent – arguably one of the most important duties of our office. Methods for identification may range from fingerprint and dental comparison to DNA comparison in some cases. This is a multidisciplinary approach which involves other county agencies. The process continues with a diligent search of the decedent's family, with which the Medical Examiner's Office has a high rate of success. (see John/Jane Doe Center for more information)

Those that die suddenly or unexpectedly often die with valuables – both monetary and sentimental – in their possession. The importance of ensuring that these items make their way to the next of kin cannot be underestimated. Often, the retention of the decedent's personal property is of the utmost importance to the next of kin. We take this responsibility seriously, accurately tracking and recording the chain of custody until the property is returned to the family.

When a death occurs at home, that person may leave behind many medications, many of which are often controlled substances. As part of our investigation we collect and inventory all of the decedent's prescription medications at the scene. This serves three functions. First, we can inventory the pills remaining and based on the dosage and dates gain an understanding as to whether there was medication overuse or non-compliance. Second, medications can give clues to an individual's medical or social history, and provide names of prescribing physicians who may know critical information about the person's history. Lastly, we take the medications out of the home, eliminating the possibility of inappropriate use by other members of the household (especially children) as well as the possibility that the medications will become part of illegal trafficking. Disposal of the medications occurs at regular intervals after a period of secure storage.

Medical Examiner investigators discuss the circumstances of the death with the decedent's family; interviews are conducted at the scene; and additional statements are obtained from witnesses, the treating physician and responding emergency personnel. They offer the family free support through our Bereavement Center. Follow up investigations is required in many cases which involves review of medical records, police reports and traffic accident reports.

The Medical Examiner Investigators are the front line for our office – the eyes and ears of the Medical Examiner. Their caring attitude, compassion, professionalism, and objectivity allow our office to conduct thorough and accurate death investigations while at the same time help ease the difficult time the family will have during their time of grief.