AUTOPSIES

Nearly 2,000 autopsies are performed each year and serve as a critical component used by the Medical Examiner to determine a decedent's cause and manner of death. The autopsy consists of both an external and internal examination of the body. Externally, the condition of the body, evidence of medical intervention, scars, tattoos, injuries, and any other external marks are noted. Internally – through surgical incisions across the chest and abdomen and across the top of the head – the organs of the head, torso, and any other necessary aspects of the body are thoroughly examined individually, removed, sectioned, and a biopsy taken for possible further microscopic examination. During the examination, specimens for possible toxicological testing are collected, which may include blood, urine, liver, vitreous (eye) fluid, stomach contents, and other portions of body fluids or organs. Digital photographs may be taken at various points to document certain findings or lack of findings.

One of the main misconceptions is that the body is not suitable for viewing in a funeral after the procedure. This is far from true. In fact, the changes made during an autopsy are easily hidden by a mortuary so that the individual can be viewed by loved ones.

In 2010, 1851 of the 2718 individuals examined at the Medical Examiner's Office, had an autopsy performed. Of the 1851 autopsies, 152 were performed by pathology residents under the direct supervision of a board certified pathologist. The remaining 867 individuals had sufficient history and known circumstances to be certified without autopsy based on the investigation and external examination of the body alone.

Decedents who do not fall under the Medical Examiner Office's jurisdiction, or in whom an autopsy is not necessary to determine the cause of death, may have an autopsy requested and paid for by the decedent's next of kin. In 2010, the San Diego County Medical Examiner performed 23 family requested autopsies.

It has been said that the body is the only unbiased witness to the death. It is our office's responsibility to hear what that body is saying, speaking for the dead in a way, so that loved ones can receive closure, light can be shed on a criminal investigation, and vital statistics can be gathered for the community at large.