DEATHS WE INVESTIGATE

Under California law the Medical Examiner is both required and empowered to determine the cause and circumstance (manner) of certain deaths. For additional details, see Government Code Section 27491 and the Health and Safety Code 102850. In general, deaths of a sudden and unexpected nature and those related to any type of injury or intoxication must be investigated by our office. These include deaths that are obviously due to trauma (such as motor vehicle related fatalities) and deaths known or suspected to be due to drug or alcohol intoxication. In addition, if an injury or intoxication merely contributes to the death - even in a small way - or is suspected to have contributed to death, the death falls under our jurisdiction. This applies when an individual dies of complications of a prior injury, even if that injury occurred many years ago.

Each death is assigned a Medical Examiner Investigator, who will go to the location of the death, interview family and friends, and obtain medical records, providing a synopsis of the circumstances surround the death. A postmortem examination (autopsy) is conducted by a physician specializing in forensic pathology in order to determine the cause of death, and a death certificate will be completed. This examination normally occurs within three days of our receipt of the decedent's body. Our forensic pathologist staff will assess whether an autopsy and/or laboratory tests are required as part of the examination. Autopsies are required in approximately 75% of the cases we examine. In the others, an examination of only the external surfaces of the body is performed and the death can be certified by investigation and review of the medical history. If we do not require an autopsy for our official purposes, the legal next-of-kin may request that we perform one at his/her expense.

While we try to accommodate all the wishes of family members and the decedent, occasionally the circumstances of the death necessitate that an autopsy be performed despite the oppositions of the family or the decedent. Common reasons include the involvement of a law enforcement agency, mandates specified in California Law, and our legal obligation to investigate deaths under our jurisdiction.