Introduction to the Medical Examiner

San Diego County Citizens Law Enforcement Review Board

November 5, 2026

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Chief Medical Examiner

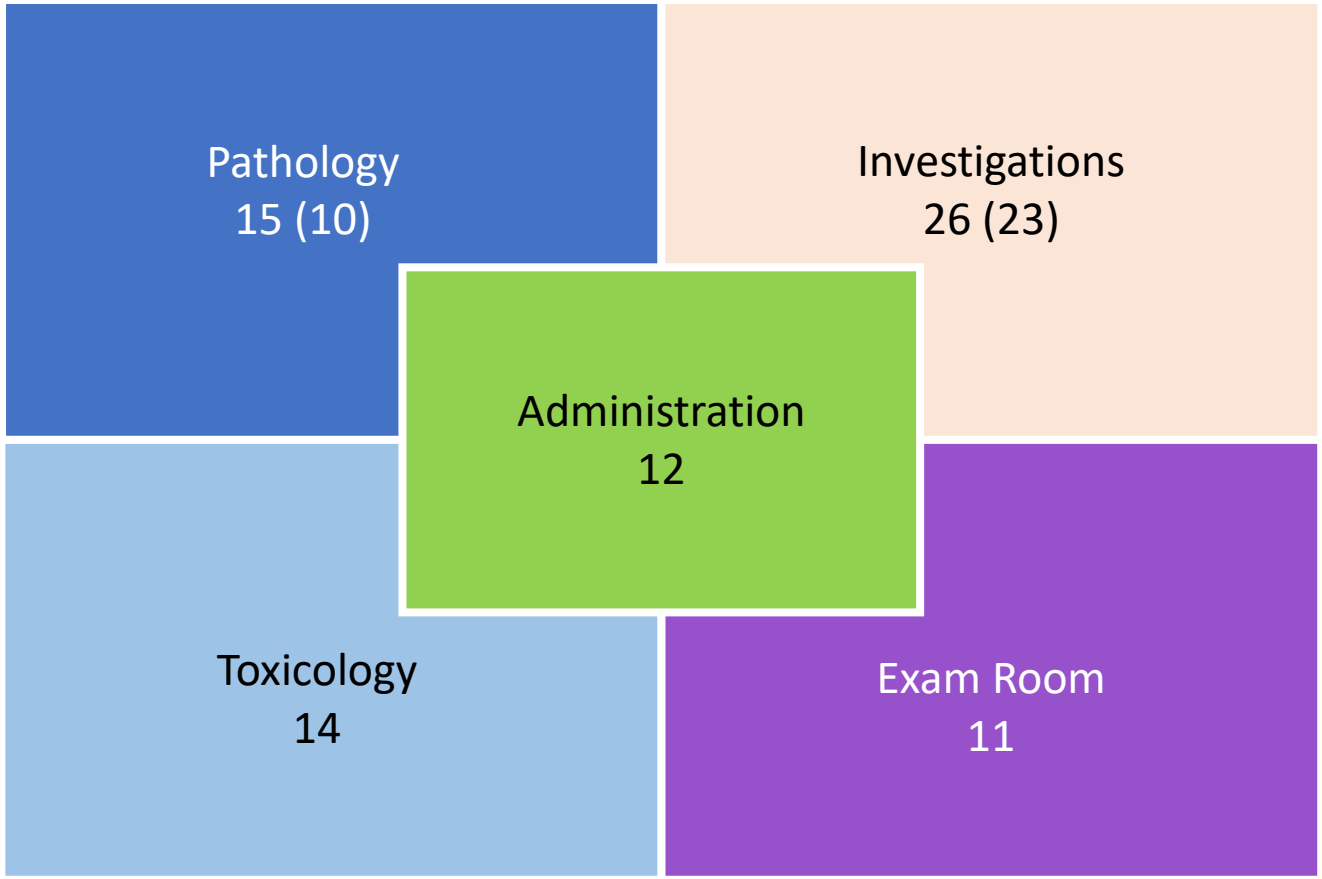
- 3.3 million people
- 4,300 square miles
- 24,000 deaths/year



Opened in 2009
One location
Kearny Mesa



Staffing and Budget



- Standalone County department
- $23M Budget
- 78 Staff

CA Government Code 27491

- Known or suspected homicides
- Known or suspected suicides
- Deaths due to accident or injury, recent or old
- Drowning, fire, hanging, gunshot, stabbing, cutting, exposure, starvation, acute alcoholism, drug addition, strangulation, or aspiration
- All violent, sudden, or unusual and unattended deaths
- Not attended by physician in last 20 days
- Self-induced or criminal abortion
- SIDS
- Death whole or in part due to criminal means
- Associated with rape or crime against nature
- Deaths in prison (in custody)
- Contagious disease and constituting a public hazard
- Occupational diseases or hazards
- Deaths in State Mental Hospitals
- Any death reported to the office

CA Health & Safety Code 102850

- Suicide
- Following injury or accident
- Under such circumstances as to afford reasonable ground to suspect that the death was caused by the criminal act of another.
- Deaths not under medical attendance
- Deaths where there is no physician to certify death
- Attending physician is unable to state the cause of death

CA Health & Safety Code 102850

- Suicide
- Following injury or accident
- Under su… death wa…
- Deaths n…
- Deaths w…
- Attending physician is unable to state the cause of death

That is to say…

- All violent, sudden, unusual, and unattended deaths.
- Suspected suicide, accident, or homicide
- Any death of public health concern
- Others…

Coroner vs Medical Examiner

Coroner

- Old (1194 A.D.)
- Elected
- Requirements minimal
- May be susceptible to conflict of interest, lack of training, etc.

Medical Examiner

- Newer: First system 1918 (NYC)
- Appointed
- Must be (Forensic) Pathologist
- Conflict of interest minimized

Coroner vs Medical Examiner

Sheriff Coroner

- Division in the Sheriff's department
- Sheriff is Coroner
- Same CA statutes apply
- Majority of counties in CA

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In San Diego County, the Medical Examiner is a department separate from any other department, including the Sheriff, District Attorney, or other law enforcement agencies.

How we get involved

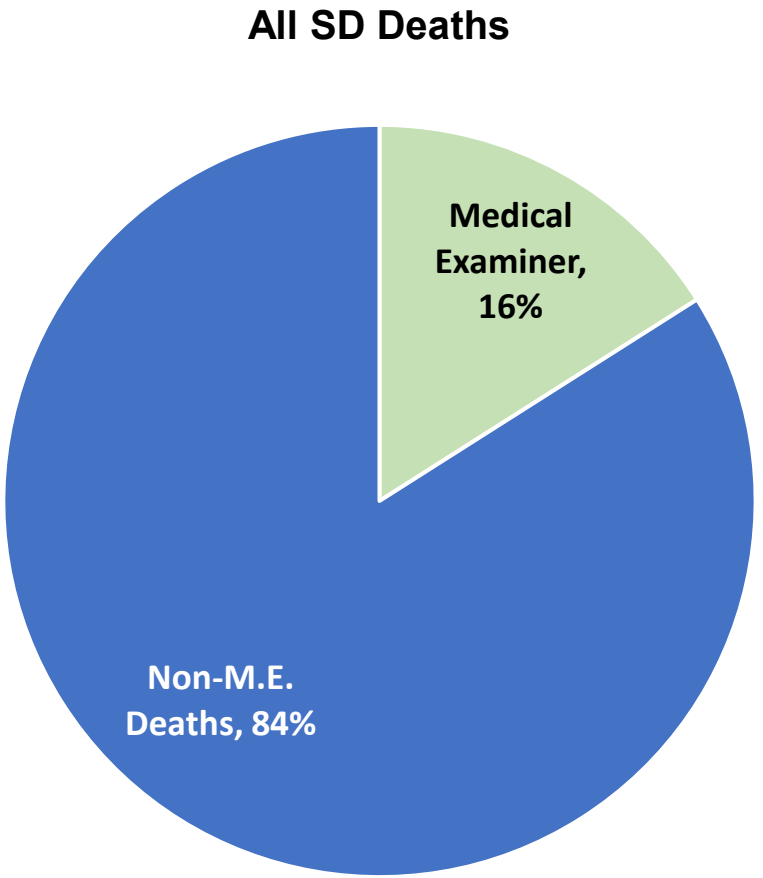
We are notified of deaths that may fall under our jurisdiction

Approximately 40% of all county deaths are reported to the M.E.



Medical Examiner Cases

- We investigate 16% (approximately 3,500) of the deaths in the county
- Most deaths are certified by community physicians



General Overview of Process

Hours to Days

Death Occurs → Notified of death → Investigator to scene → Scene Investigation → Transport Body → Next day: Autopsy







Body → Released → Family's Funeral Home

Weeks to Months

Toxicology, Neuropath, consultants, Medical records

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Final determinations and reports

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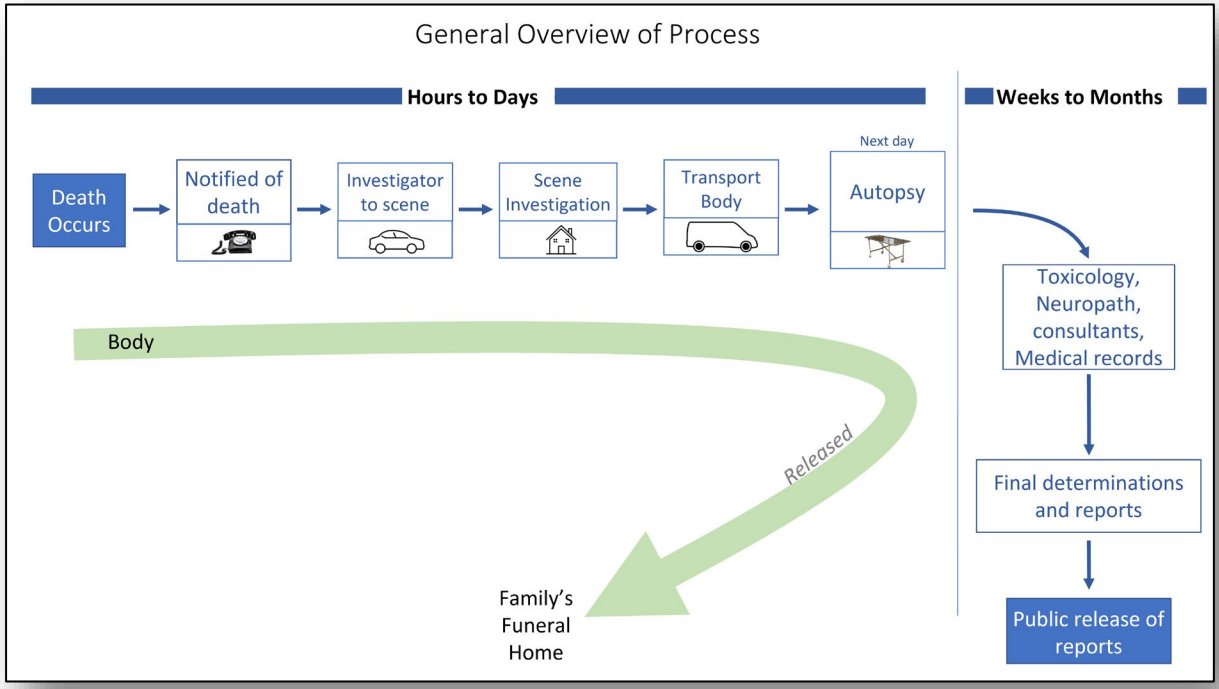
Public release of reports

General Overview of Process

- Identification
- Locate Next of Kin
- Notify Next of Kin
- Manage Property
- Manage Evidence



Body Examination

- 3600 Examinations:
  - 50% full autopsy with toxicology
  - 50% external examination, medical history/records, +/- x-ray and/or Toxicology

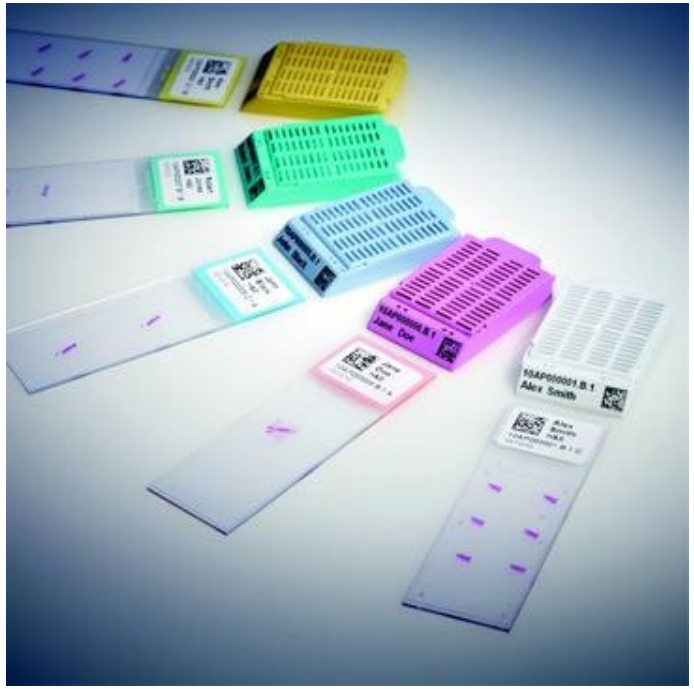


Body Examination

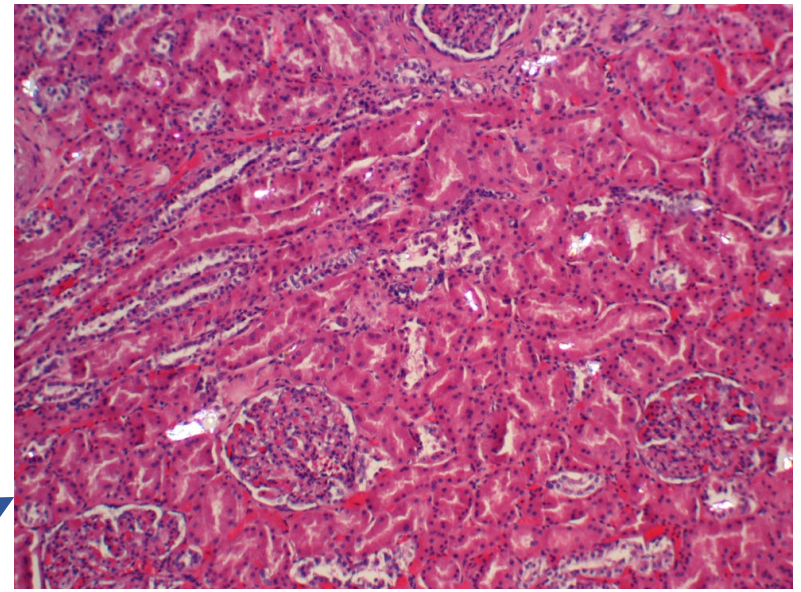
Who can attend?

- Investigation: Limited to individuals directly involved in the death investigation. (GC § 27522(f), GC § 27491.4(a))
- Law enforcement-involved deaths: Personnel directly involved in the death are specifically prohibited from participating in the postmortem examination or attending the autopsy. (GC § 27522(f))
- Educational and Research: Exceptions at the coroner's discretion, in consultation with the autopsy physician. (GC § 27522(f))

Histology







Toxicology





Radiology

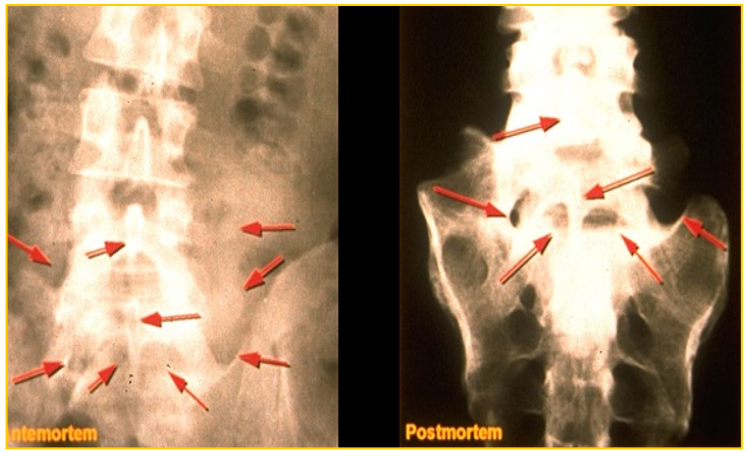




Identification

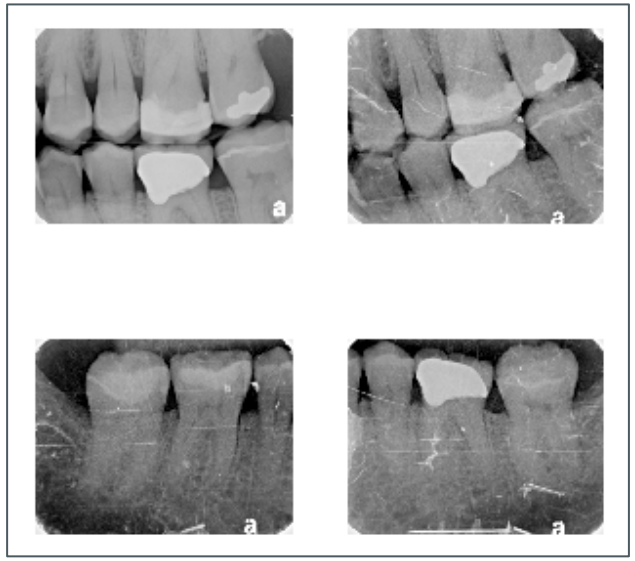
Fingerprints





X-ray Comparison

Dental Comparison





DNA

Other functions of office

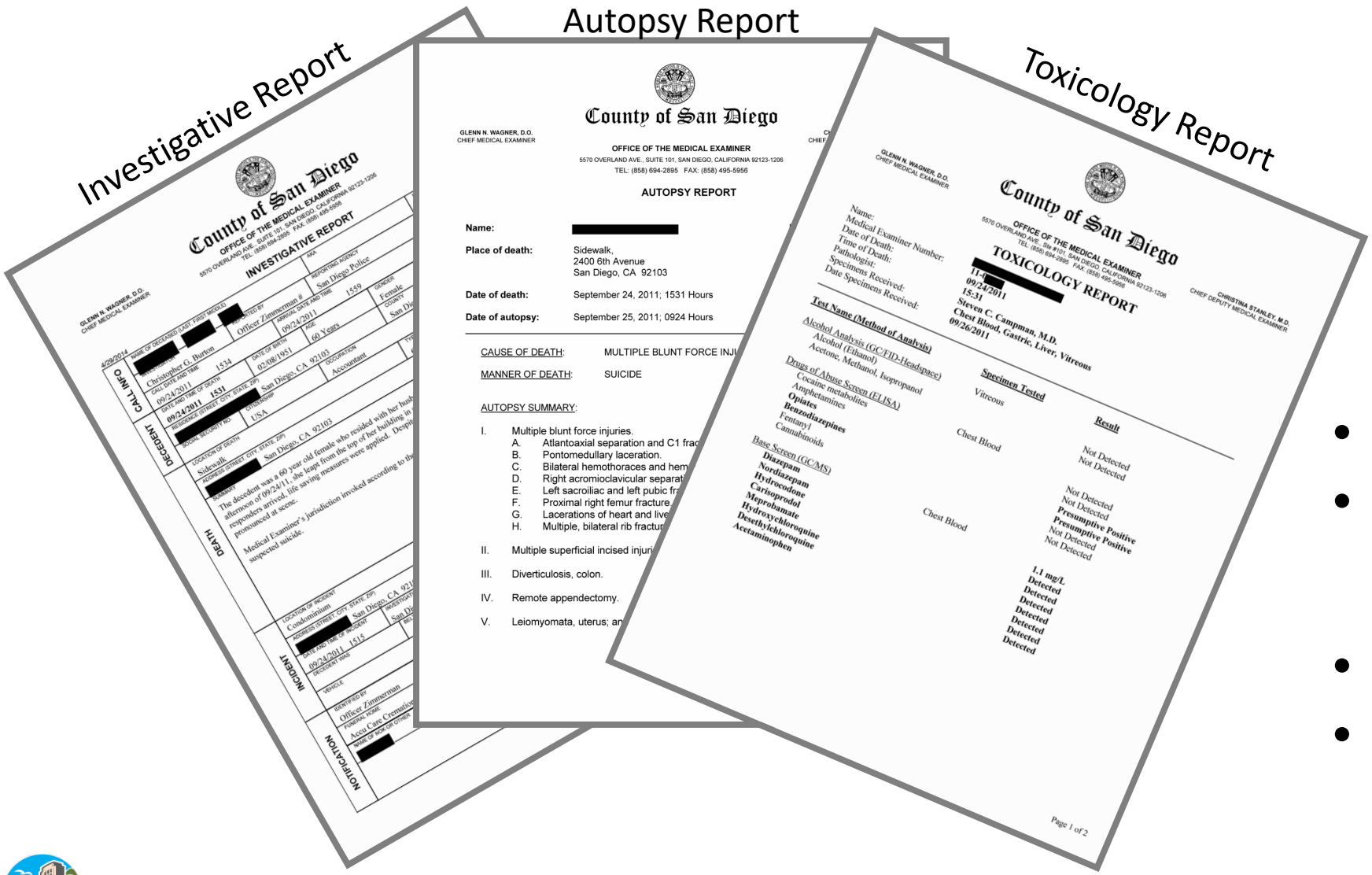
Find and notify NOK



Manage decedent property



Reports from the M.E.



- Diagrams
- Consultative reports
  - Anthro, dental, Neuropathology
- Digital photos (CCP §129)
- Digital X-ray images

Our primary mandate

- Determine the **Cause and Manner** of death

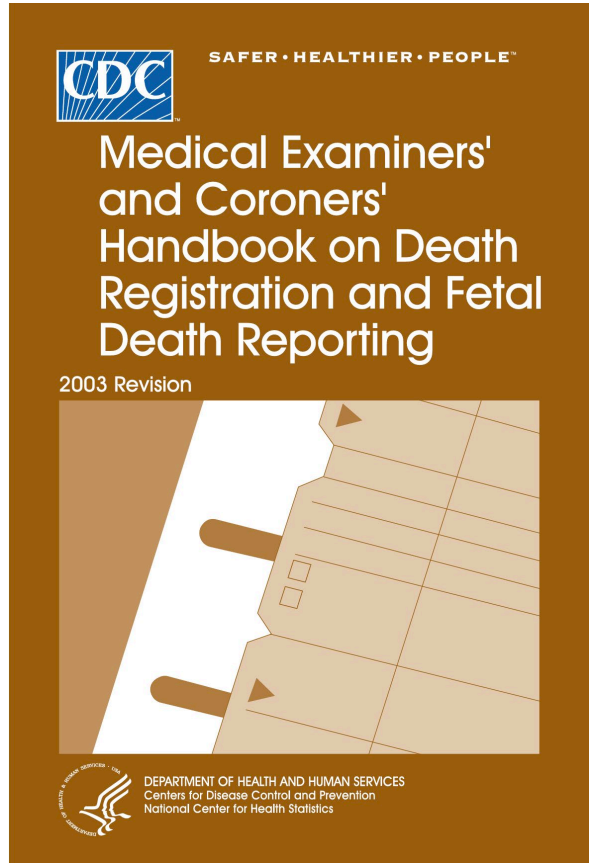
Cause of death

- Disease or injury which initiates the sequence of events that leads to the death
- No time constraint
- No intervening cause
    - Examples
        - Hypertensive cardiovascular disease
        - Diabetes mellitus
        - Gunshot wound
        - Blunt force trauma
        - Complications of quadriplegia due to remote fracture of cervical spine

Cause of death is a medical opinion

Precision of knowledge required to complete death certificate items

The cause-of-death section in the medical examiner's or coroner's certification is always a medical **opinion**. This opinion is, of course, a synthesis of all information derived from both the investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death and the autopsy, if performed. It represents the best effort of the medical examiner or coroner to reduce to a few words his or her entire synthesis of the cause of death.

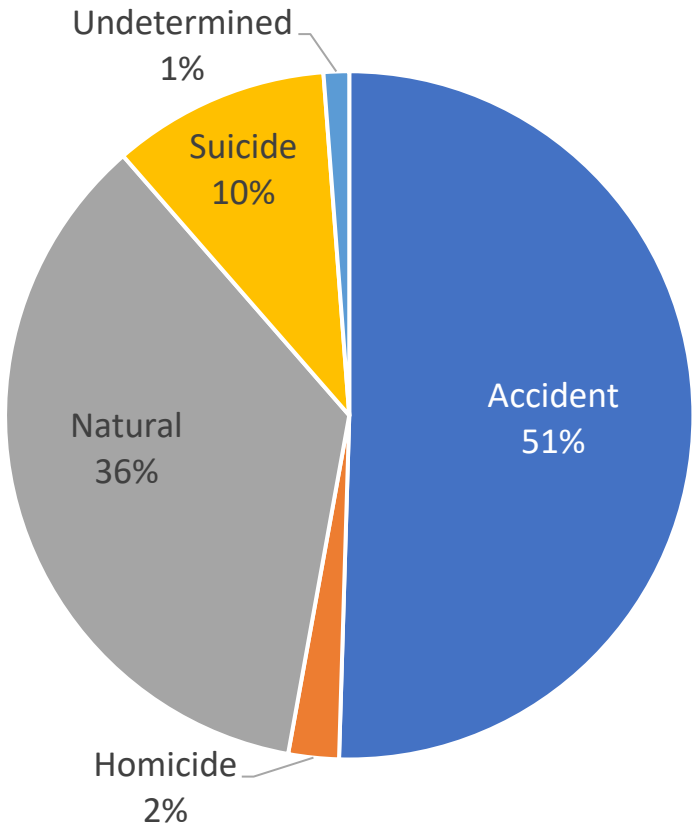


CA Government Code- Cause of Death

- 27491. (a) It shall be the duty of the coroner to inquire into and determine the circumstances, manner, and cause of all…..
- 27522. (a) A forensic autopsy shall only be conducted by a licensed physician and surgeon. The results of a forensic autopsy shall only be determined by a licensed physician and surgeon.
- 27491.5. The cause of death … shall be in conformity with facts ascertained from inquiry, autopsy and other scientific findings.

Manner of death

- A classification meant to reflect the circumstances of death
  - Natural
  - Suicide
  - Homicide
  - Accident
  - Undetermined



Originally conceived and still intended for public health surveillance and vital statistics.
<u>Not a legal determination</u>.

Manner of Death

Manner	Definition
Natural	Death is entirely due to natural disease.
Accident	Death resulting from an injury or intoxication occurring without evidence of intent to cause harm or death.
Suicide	Death resulting from a self-inflicted act that occurred with **intent** to cause harm or death.
Homicide	Death resulting from a volitional act or act of omission committed by another person to cause fear, harm, pain or death. (i.e. Death at the hand of another). *Note: The classification of homicide is a neutral medicolegal determination and does not require intent to cause harm or death.*
Undetermined	Deaths where available information is no more compelling for one manner than another OR there is insufficient information to assign manner.

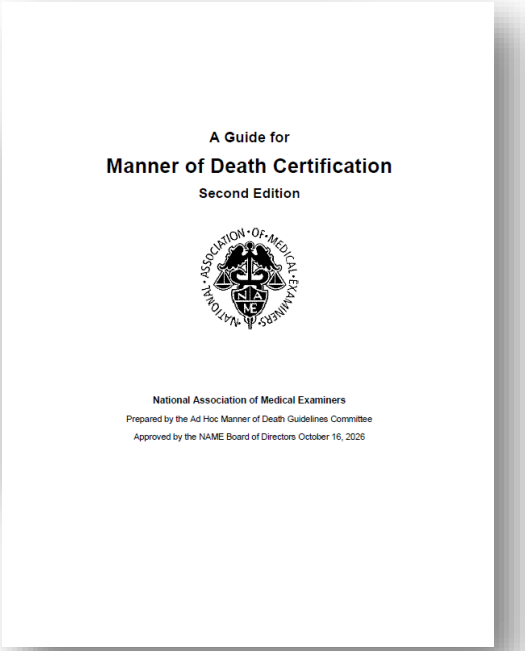
CA Government Code – Manner of Death

- 27522. (d) (1) For purposes of this section, the manner of death shall be determined by the coroner or medical examiner of a county. If a forensic autopsy is conducted by a licensed physician and surgeon, the coroner or medical examiner shall consult with the licensed physician and surgeon in the determination of the manner of death.

Manner of Death

Manner of death is an opinion based on the circumstances surrounding the death as known at the time of certification. Consequently, the certifier should have access to all relevant

The manner of death recorded on the death certificate serves important public health, statistical, and administrative purposes and should not be interpreted as a judicial determination of criminal responsibility or civil liability. A manner of Homicide does not indicate that an individual should be criminally charged, just as a manner of Accident does not indicate that criminal charges could not be appropriate. Legal determinations and manner of death determinations serve different purposes and should be considered independently.



NAME Guide for Manner Determination, 2nd ed., 2026

Our Relationship with Law Enforcement

- We work <u>with</u>, but not <u>for</u> law enforcement
- We handle different aspects of the investigation





Courtroom Testimony

- Deputy Medical Examiners
- Toxicologists
- Investigators
- Usually called/subpoenaed by the Prosecution
- …but we do not testify FOR the prosecution or defense
- Independent expert witness testimony



Thank You