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**Medicolegal Death Investigation:  
Terms and Definitions**

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# Medicolegal Death Investigation: Terms and Definitions

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## Foreword

The American Academy of Forensic Sciences established the Academy Standards Board (ASB) in 2015 with a vision of safeguarding Justice, Integrity and Fairness through Consensus Based American National Standards. To that end, the ASB develops consensus based forensic standards within a framework accredited by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), and provides training to support those standards. ASB values integrity, scientific rigor, openness, due process, collaboration, excellence, diversity and inclusion. ASB is dedicated to developing and making freely accessible the highest quality documentary forensic science consensus Standards, Guidelines, Best Practices, and Technical Reports in a wide range of forensic science disciplines as a service to forensic practitioners and the legal system.

This document was revised, prepared, and finalized as a standard by the Medicolegal Death Investigation Consensus Body of the AAFS Standards Board. The draft of this standard was developed by the Medicolegal Death Investigation Subcommittee of the Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) for Forensic Science.

Questions, comments, and suggestions for the improvement of this document can be sent to AAFS-ASB Secretariat, [asb@aaafs.org](mailto:asb@aaafs.org) or 401 N 21st Street, Colorado Springs, CO 80904.

All hyperlinks and web addresses shown in this document are current as of the publication date of this standard.

**Keywords:** *medicolegal death investigation, coroner, medical examiner*

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# 1                   Medicolegal Death Investigation: Terms and Definitions

## 2   **1 Scope**

3   This technical document provides the terms and definitions for use in standards development in the  
4   medicolegal death investigation community in the United States. The list of terms included in this  
5   document are fundamental to medicolegal death investigation and associated standards; it is not  
6   meant to be exhaustive.

## 7   **2 Terms and Definitions**

### 8   **2.1** 9   **accreditation**

10   Formal recognition by an independent accreditation body that a medicolegal system, office, or  
11   agency meets or exceeds a prescribed set of standards.

### 12   **2.2** 13   **accident (manner of death)**

14   Unexpected or not reasonably foreseen death that results from an injury or toxicity.

### 15   **2.3** 16   **autopsy**

17   Postmortem diagnostic medical procedure conducted by a pathologist or other specially trained  
18   medical personnel, consisting of external and internal examination of a decedent, and may include  
19   other ancillary tests.

### 20   **2.4** 21   **cause of death**

22   Medical opinion of the disease or injury that resulted in a person's death.

### 23   **2.5** 24   **certification**

25   Procedure by which an accredited third party gives written assurance that a person, product,  
26   process, or service conforms to specific requirements.

27   *ISO/IEC Guide 2:2016 [mod]*

### 28   **2.6** 29   **chief medicolegal officer**

30   Medical examiner, coroner, justice of the peace or other official who oversees the operation of a  
31   medicolegal death investigation office and/or system.

### 32   **2.7** 33   **certified medicolegal death investigator**

34   Medicolegal death investigator who has completed the requirements for Certification (Registry or  
35   Board) by an accredited credentialing body; currently American Board of Medicolegal Death  
36   Investigators.

- 37 **2.8**  
38 **coroner**  
39 An elected or appointed official responsible for overseeing medicolegal death investigations,  
40 usually for a single county, and for certifying the cause and manner of death in these investigations;  
41 duties vary based on local enabling statutes.
- 42 **2.9**  
43 **could not be determined (manner of death)**  
44 (see 2.37 undetermined)
- 45 **2.10**  
46 **death certificate**  
47 A permanent document, registered with the vital records office, that states the identification, fact of  
48 death, cause of death, and manner of death; a source of mortality statistics.
- 49 **2.11**  
50 **death scene**  
51 Location or site at which a death is pronounced, and at which the decedent's body is located. This  
52 need not be the same location as the incident scene.
- 53 **2.12**  
54 **decedent**  
55 Deceased person or any suspected human remains.
- 56 **2.13**  
57 **external evaluation**  
58 Physical assessment of the decedent by a medicolegal death investigator.
- 59 **2.14**  
60 **external examination**  
61 Diagnostic medical procedure conducted by a pathologist or other specially trained medical  
62 personnel that consists of physical inspection of the decedent without internal examination; can  
63 include ancillary tests.
- 64 **2.15**  
65 **forensic autopsy**  
66 Autopsy authorized by law and typically performed under the jurisdiction of chief medicolegal  
67 officer for criminal justice, civil, and/or public health purposes.
- 68 **2.16**  
69 **forensic pathologist**  
70 Physician who is board-certified in forensic pathology by an accredited credentialing body;  
71 currently American Board of Pathology and American Osteopathic Board of Pathology.
- 72 **2.17**  
73 **forensic pathology**  
74 Practice of medicine in which the principles of pathology are applied to problems of potential legal,  
75 public health, or public safety significance; a common function is the performance of autopsies to  
76 determine the cause and manner of death.

77 **2.18**78 **homicide (manner of death)**

79 Death as a result of a volitional act or act of omission (e.g., injury, poisoning, gross neglect of a child)  
 80 committed by another person to cause fear, harm, pain or death. Intent to cause death is a common  
 81 element but is not required for use of the manner of homicide. The classification of homicide for the  
 82 purposes of death certification is a "neutral" term and neither indicates nor implies criminal intent,  
 83 which remains a determination within the province of legal processes.

84 NOTE There may be additional cases that rise to the level of the manner of homicide such as those due to acts  
 85 of serious neglect (e.g., firing a bullet into the air) or application of force (e.g., restraint).

86 **2.19**87 **hospital autopsy**

88 Autopsy requested by a medical caretaker or healthcare facility, usually authorized by the next of  
 89 kin.

90 **2.20**91 **incident scene**

92 Location at which a fatal injury or fatal sequence of events was initiated. This may or may not be the  
 93 death scene.

94 **2.21**95 **jurisdiction**

96 (1) Legal authority to make legal decisions and judgments regarding a death, including  
 97 performance of autopsy, as well as investigation and certification of cause and manner of death.

98 (2) Geographic area in which a medical examiner or coroner's authority applies.

99 **2.22**100 **manner of death**

101 Classification system based on the circumstances under which death occurred and any available  
 102 postmortem findings, as known to the MDI authority at the time of certification; usually consists of  
 103 accident, homicide, natural, suicide, and undetermined. Manner of death classification is a statutory  
 104 function of the medicolegal death investigation authority, as part of death certification for purposes  
 105 of vital statistics and public health, and does not imply a legal or judicial conclusion.

106 **2.23**107 **medical examiner**

108 Appointed forensic pathologist whose duty is to oversee medicolegal death investigations, perform  
 109 postmortem examinations, and certify cause and manner of death. In some jurisdictions, individuals  
 110 with other qualifications hold the title "Medical Examiner", but for purposes of this document those  
 111 individuals are considered medicolegal death investigators.

112 **2.24**113 **medicolegal death investigation**

114 Formal inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of a human being; investigative  
 115 information is considered with autopsy findings and adjunctive studies (if performed) to determine  
 116 the cause and manner of death.

- 117 **2.25**  
 118 **medicolegal death investigation authority**  
 119 Person or persons whose duty it is to perform medicolegal death investigations for a designated  
 120 jurisdiction and ensure certification of cause and manner of death; duties vary based on local  
 121 enabling statutes.
- 122 **2.26**  
 123 **medicolegal death investigation office**  
 124 Physical location of an agency (usually a medical examiner or coroner office) with the authority to  
 125 perform medicolegal death investigations.
- 126 **2.27**  
 127 **medicolegal death investigation system**  
 128 The statutorily established infrastructure (e.g., county coroner or state medical examiner) that  
 129 exists to conduct medicolegal death investigations within a defined geographic area.
- 130 **2.28**  
 131 **medicolegal death investigator**  
 132 Individual who performs medicolegal death investigations and includes those who have not  
 133 completed the requirements for certification and is not certified.
- 134 **2.29**  
 135 **natural (manner of death)**  
 136 Death due solely to natural disease.
- 137 **2.30**  
 138 **next of kin**  
 139 The person(s) who stand(s) in the closest legally recognized relationship to a deceased individual.
- 140 **2.31**  
 141 **postmortem examination**  
 142 Examination of a decedent and associated information by a forensic pathologist or other medical  
 143 personnel certified to perform such examinations; this may include autopsy, external examination,  
 144 ancillary tests, evaluation of circumstances, review of medical records and other contextual  
 145 information.
- 146 **2.32**  
 147 **private autopsy**  
 148 Autopsy requested and authorized by next of kin.
- 149 **2.33**  
 150 **registry certified medicolegal death investigator**  
 151 Medicolegal death investigator who has completed the requirements for Registry certification by  
 152 the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators or equivalent.
- 153 **2.34**  
 154 **suicide (manner of death)**  
 155 Death resulting from a volitional, self-inflicted act.



156 **2.35**  
157 **undetermined (manner of death)**  
158 Manner of death used when the information pointing to one manner of death is no more compelling  
159 than another after thorough consideration of all available information.

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