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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 Medicolegal Death Investigation Subcommittee of the Organization of Scientific Area Committees determined that there was variation in the terms and definitions relevant to medicolegal death investigation. This document standardizes the terms and definitions to promote consistency across disciplines and jurisdictions.~~

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@aafs.org](mailto:asb@aafs.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*

**Table of Contents** *(to be updated for final publication)*

1 Scope.....

2 Terms and Definitions .....

DRAFT

# Medicolegal Death Investigation: Terms and Definitions

## 1 Scope

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

## 2 Terms and Definitions

### 2.1

#### **accreditation**

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

### 2.2

#### **accident (manner of death)**

Unexpected or not reasonably foreseen death that results from an [eventinjury](#) or [happeningtoxicity](#).

### 2.3

#### **autopsy**

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

### 2.4

#### **cause of death**

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

### 2.5

#### **certification**

Procedure by which [a qualifiedan accredited](#) third party gives written assurance that a person, product, process, or service conforms to specific requirements.

*ISO/IEC Guide 2:2016 [mod]*

### 2.6

#### **chief medicolegal officer**

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

### 2.7

#### **certified medicolegal death investigator**

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

## 2.8

### **coroner**

An elected or appointed official responsible for overseeing medicolegal death investigations, usually for a single county, and for certifying the cause and manner of death in these investigations; duties vary based on local enabling statutes.

## 2.9

### **could not be determined (manner of death)**

(see 2.37 undetermined)

## 2.10

### **death certificate**

A permanent document, registered with the vital records office, that states the identification, fact of death, cause of death, and manner of death; a source of mortality statistics.

## 2.11

### **death scene**

Location or site at which a death is pronounced, and at which the decedent's body is located. This need not be the same location as the incident scene.

## 2.12

### **decedent**

Deceased person or any suspected human remains.

## 2.13

### **external evaluation**

Physical assessment of the decedent by a medicolegal death investigator.

## 2.14

### **external examination**

Diagnostic medical procedure conducted by a pathologist or other specially trained medical personnel that consists of physical inspection of the decedent without internal examination; can include ancillary tests.

## 2.15

### **forensic autopsy**

Autopsy authorized by law and typically performed under the jurisdiction of chief medicolegal officer for criminal justice, civil, and/or public health purposes.

## 2.16

### **forensic pathologist**

Physician who is board-certified in forensic pathology by an accredited credentialing body; currently American Board of Pathology and American Osteopathic Board of Pathology.

## 2.17

### **forensic pathology**

Practice of medicine in which the principles of pathology are applied to problems of potential legal, public health, or public safety significance; a common function is the performance of autopsies to determine the cause and manner of death.

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

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

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

**2.19****hospital autopsy**

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

**2.20****incident scene**

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

**2.21****jurisdiction**

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

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

**2.22****manner of death**

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

**2.23****medical examiner**

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

**2.24****medicolegal death investigation**

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

**2.25**

**medicolegal death investigation authority**

Person or persons whose duty it is to perform medicolegal death investigations for a designated jurisdiction and ensure certification of cause and manner of death; duties vary based on local enabling statutes.

**2.26**

**medicolegal death investigation office**

Physical location of an agency (usually a medical examiner or coroner office) with the authority to perform medicolegal death investigations.

**2.27**

**medicolegal death investigation system**

The statutorily established infrastructure (e.g., county coroner or state medical examiner) that exists to conduct medicolegal death investigations within a defined geographic area.

**2.28**

**medicolegal death investigator**

Individual who performs medicolegal death investigations and includes those who have not completed the requirements for certification and is not certified.

**2.29**

**natural (manner of death)**

Death due solely to natural disease.

**2.30**

**next of kin**

The person(s) who stand(s) in the closest legally recognized relationship to a deceased individual.

**2.31**

**postmortem examination**

Examination of a decedent and associated information by a forensic pathologist or other medical personnel certified to perform such examinations; this may include autopsy, external examination, ancillary tests, evaluation of circumstances, review of medical records and other contextual information.

**2.32**

**private autopsy**

Autopsy requested and authorized by next of kin.

**2.33**

**registry certified medicolegal death investigator**

Medicolegal death investigator who has completed the requirements for Registry certification by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators or equivalent.

**2.34**

**suicide (manner of death)**

Death resulting from a volitional, self-inflicted act.



**2.35**

**undetermined (manner of death)**

Manner of death used when the information pointing to one manner of death is no more compelling than another ~~when~~ after thorough consideration of all available information.

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