



Death Investigation:

A Guide for the Scene Investigator



Every Scene.
Every Time.



Research Report

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Developed and Approved by the
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November 1999

The title of this report, formerly "National Guidelines for Death Investigation," has been changed in this reprint for consistency with the titles of other Guides in the NIJ series.

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This project was cosponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Bureau of Justice Assistance.

“Every Scene, Every Time” logo designed and created by Steven Clark, Ph.D., and Kevin Spicer of Occupational Research and Assessment, Inc.

This project was supported under grant number 96–MU–CS–0005 by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, and by the Bureau of Justice Assistance and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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NCJ 167568

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Message From the Attorney General

The sudden or unexplained death of an individual has a profound impact on families and friends of the deceased and places significant responsibility on the agencies tasked with determining the cause of death. Increasingly, science and technology play a key role in death investigations. One of the hallmarks of science is adherence to clear and well-grounded protocols.

In many jurisdictions, responsibility for conducting death investigations may rest with pathologists, medical examiners, or coroners, in addition to their other duties. There is little training available in the best procedures for handling these crucial and sensitive tasks. To help fill the gap, the National Institute of Justice, joined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Bureau of Justice Assistance, supported the development of the guidelines presented in this report.

These guidelines were produced with the vigorous participation of highly experienced officials and professionals who served on the National Medicolegal Review Panel. A technical working group of 144 professionals from across the country provided the grassroots input to the panel's work. I applaud their willingness to take the time to serve in this effort and to hammer out this consensus on the best approach to conducting thorough and competent death investigations.

Jurisdictions will want to carefully consider these guidelines and their applicability to local agencies and circumstances. By adhering to agreed-upon national standards, death investigators can arrive at the truth about a suspicious death. Families and friends can be consoled by knowing what happened to their loved one, and justice can be administered on the foundation of truth that must always guide our work.

Janet Reno
Attorney General

National Medicolegal Review Panel

The National Medicolegal Review Panel (NMRP) represents a multidisciplinary group of content area experts, each representing members of his or her respective organization. Each organization has a role—be it active involvement or oversight—in conducting death investigations and in implementing these guidelines.

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Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the Technical Working Group for Death Investigation (TWGDI). This 144-member reviewer network gave of their time to review guideline content, providing the researcher feedback from a national perspective. Additional thanks to the TWGDI executive board: Mr. Paul Davison, Kent County M.E. Office, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Mr. Bill Donovan, Jefferson Parish Coroner's Office, Harvey, Louisiana; Mr. Cullen Ellingburgh, Forensic Science Center, Orange County, California; Ms. Roberta Geiselhart, R.N., Hennepin County M.E. Office, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Dr. Elizabeth Kinnison, Office of the Chief M.E., Norfolk, Virginia; Mr. Vernon McCarty, Washoe County Coroner, Reno, Nevada; Mr. Joseph Morgan, Fulton County M.E. Office, Atlanta, Georgia; Mr. Randy Moshos, M.E. Office, New York, New York; Mr. Steve Nunez, Office of the Medical Investigator, Albuquerque, New Mexico; Ms. Rose Marie Psara, R.N., St. Louis County M.E. Office, St. Louis, Missouri; and Mr. Michael Stewart, Denver City and County Coroner's Office, Denver, Colorado, whose combined commitment to the field of death investigation is a tribute to the quality of this document. In addition, the offices that employ each member of the group share in this endeavor. Through their support, each member was given the flexibility they needed to support the project.

The author also wishes to thank the National Institute of Justice's (NIJ's) technical advisors: John E. Smialek, M.D., Chief Medical Examiner, State of Maryland; Randy L. Hanzlick, M.D., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Emory University School of Medicine; Ms. Mary Fran Ernst, Director of Medicolegal Education, St. Louis University Medical School; and Ms. Mary Lou Kearns, Coroner, Kane County, Illinois. Each made significant contributions to the project's inception, eventual funding, and timely completion. Their dedication to the science of death investigation and to the members of the investigative community is apparent throughout this document.

The Director of NIJ, the Honorable Jeremy Travis; the Director of NIJ's Office of Science and Technology, Mr. David G. Boyd; and NIJ's Forensic Science Program Manager, Richard M. Rau, Ph.D., each share responsibility for the success of this project. Credit also goes to R. Gib Parrish, M.D., of CDC, for his support and commitment to the research.

In addition, the true strength of these guidelines is derived from the stamina of the National Medicolegal Review Panel, whose members represented 12 national organizations intimately involved in the investigation of death and its outcomes. The panel also included two representatives of elected coroners. NMRP's contribution was invaluable.

And finally, the leadership of Joseph H. Davis, M.D., Medical Examiner Emeritus, Dade County, Florida, and Mr. Donald Murray, National Association of Counties, for their unrelenting efforts to get this job done and improve their profession, every scene, every time.

Steven C. Clark, Ph.D.

Executive Director

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