

Sudden Death and the Role of the Medical Examiner's Office

When death occurs suddenly...

or cannot be explained, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner conducts an investigation. All such deaths in Alberta are investigated under the authority of the Fatality Inquiries Act. The investigation is held to determine the cause and circumstances of the death. In some cases, a public inquiry is held and recommendations are made to help prevent similar deaths.

Next of kin find this pamphlet helpful in explaining the steps, which must be taken in carrying out an investigation. Information is also presented for your guidance in settling an estate in the event that the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner has investigated the death.

Answers to some of the questions and concerns you may have:

Why is an investigation necessary?

Alberta law does not permit a doctor to sign a death certificate if the cause of death is not clear or if the doctor has not attended the person within 14 days prior to death from a natural illness. The purpose of the investigation is to determine the identity of the person; the date; time and place of death; and circumstances such as the cause and manner of death.

The cooperation and assistance of next of kin and all others concerned is appreciated.

Who conducts the investigation?

Investigations are performed by medical examiners (physicians) with the assistance of medical examiner's investigators. In Edmonton and Calgary, investigators are on staff. In other parts of Alberta, police officers assume this role.

What happens during an investigation?

The medical examiner takes charge of the body, may review past medical history, and may authorize disposal of soiled or damaged clothing. Items that are directly related to the death may be retained for the investigation or for a public inquiry, or given to a police officer.

Valuables are generally handled by the police.

Will an autopsy be required?

When reasonable doubt about the medical cause of death exists, an autopsy may be authorized by the Medical Examiner. Permission of next of kin is not required.

An autopsy may include complex laboratory tests, so it may be some weeks before results are known. In cases where an autopsy is not necessary, an external examination is performed.

What do these services cost?

There is no charge for investigations. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner usually pays transportation costs *unless an emergency vehicle* (e.g., ambulance) has been dispatched to attempt life saving, rescue or search.

You are encouraged to discuss any concern over a transportation cost with our office in Edmonton or Calgary, especially if you receive a bill for transportation of the deceased that is not within the emergency response category outlined above. Please read the section entitled "The Autopsy Report" as some charges do apply to that and other documents.

Will there be a public inquiry?

Certain cases are reviewed by a four-member board, which decides if a public inquiry should be held. Public inquiries are not required for all deaths. They are held most often in cases of accidental deaths, (especially preventable deaths) or deaths in custody.

What happens at a public inquiry?

A provincial court judge conducts the public inquiry during which a jury is sometimes called. The inquiry will determine the identity of the deceased; the date, time and place of death; and the circumstances, notably the cause and manner of death. The judge may make recommendations for the prevention of similar incidents. Findings of legal responsibility or any other conclusion of law are not permitted.

Settling of Estates

Institutions such as banks and insurance companies usually require an official **proof of death** before claims and other dispositions may be settled. In cases where the Medical Examiner has investigated a death, neither the family doctor nor the hospital may complete any documents. There are two types of documents, which serve as proof of death:

1. **Certificate of Death**

This document is the official government certificate of death. Most firms accept this document as proof of death. It provides the name of the deceased, date of death, place of death (city, town, village) marital status, regular residence (city, town, village), sex and age. It does not give the cause or manner of death.

A certificate of death may be obtained from any Registry office within the province. Information concerning cost of the certificate may be obtained from individual Registry offices. A cheque or money order, payable to the individual Registry, for each copy required must be enclosed with the request. Registry offices may be located by checking your local yellow pages for Licensing and Registry Services.

2. **Certificate of Medical Examiner**

This document provides the medical cause and the manner of death, together with a brief description of the circumstances. Insurance companies often require this information. Rather than completing forms provided by insurance companies or banks, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner provides the Certificate of Medical Examiner upon authorization by next of kin. There is a charge for this form. (See "Further information and assistance")

Your consent is required

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner will not provide an insurance company, financial institution or any person with a *Certificate of Medical Examiner* without written consent from a next of kin. A form of consent titled "Authorization for Release of Information" is provided to Next of Kin by the Medical Examiner's Office.

If the death was not entirely due to natural causes, you may wish to consult with your lawyer before signing the authorization to release information.

The Autopsy Report

If an autopsy has been authorized by the Medical Examiner's Office, a summary of the autopsy report is available for a nominal charge to the next of kin.

Should you require a copy of the detailed autopsy report, including toxicological analysis, **OR** a report on toxicological analysis alone, there will be a nominal charge. Information on costs is available from one of the Medical Examiner's Offices. A cheque or money order should be made payable to the Minister of Finance and mailed to the appropriate Medical Examiner's Office listed below.

Further information and assistance

Staff in the Edmonton and Calgary offices of Alberta's Chief Medical Examiner will be pleased to assist you with any further questions or concerns, including costs for copies of reports.

Edmonton

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner
7007 116 Street
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6H 5R8
Telephone: (780) 427-4987
Fax: (780) 422-1265

Calgary

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner
4070 Bowness Rd NW
Calgary, Alberta, Canada T3B 3R7
Telephone: (403) 297-8123
Fax: (403) 297-3429

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner may be reached toll free through the Alberta Government RITE telephone system during the weekday office hours.

Alberta's Chief Medical Examiner is responsible for administration of the Fatality Inquires Act.

Alberta
JUSTICE

Chief Medical Examiner