Guidelines for the Determination of Manner of Death

Illinois Coroners and Medical Examiners Association

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INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTS

In October of 2006, ICMEA President Mike Nichols commissioned the Forensic Autopsy Guidelines Committee to draft a Determination of Manner of Death Guidelines Manual. The President charged the committee, consisting of Co-chairs Will County Coroner Patrick O’Neil and LaSalle County Coroner Jody Bernard, Kankakee County Coroner Bob Gessner, Morgan County Coroner Jeff Lair, McLean County Coroner Beth Kimmerling, J. Scott Denton, M. D. and Bryan Mitchell, M.D. to draft a document for initial review to the ICMEA members, review the comments and concerns, and revise the document accordingly.

The main responsibility of a death investigation system, whether coroner or medical examiner, is the determination of cause and manner of death. The cause and manner of death as listed on the death certificate should agree and complement one another to give the family, justice system or death registrar a basic idea of how and why the person died. First, the cause of death (COD) is simply defined as the event that led to that person’s demise (i.e. coronary atherosclerosis, cocaine intoxication, hanging, gunshot wound of the chest, etc.). The COD is conceptually thought of as the pathologic entity that can be demonstrated to another person either on the body (stab wound), in the body (ruptured aneurysm), in a toxicology report (opiate amount), or on a microscopic slide (bronchopneumonia or myocarditis). COD should not be confused with the mechanism or manner of death, which are two separate entities.

Mechanism of death is related to the COD, and is best thought of as the physiological process a person goes through in finally dying from the COD injury (i.e. bleeding and shock following from a gunshot wound, or a fatal arrhythmia resulting from lack of oxygen to myocardium from coronary artery occlusion). Mechanisms of death, or the process of dying from a wound or disease, can vary from person to person, and can even be the subject to debate even among medical professionals if the death is unwitnessed. The mechanism of death is not to be used as a COD on the death certificate (i.e. cardio respiratory arrest). Mechanism of death on a certificate is meaningless, since everyone’s heart and breathing eventually cease regardless of the true cause.

Manner of death is defined as the category which that individual’s death best fits into. These categories were established almost a hundred years ago and are now standardized into five categories as 1) Natural, 2) Accident, 3) Suicide, 4) Homicide or 5) Undetermined. Manner of death is based on the circumstances of how the injury or disease occurred, since a gunshot wound of the head as a cause of death can be an accident, suicide or homicide. After an investigation of the circumstances surrounding the death and examination of the body, the most important question is whether or not this death is natural or unnatural. Natural means that the death occurred through the natural process of aging or disease. A natural manner of death may have medical or insurance implications for the family, but almost never requires subsequent involvement of police or prosecutors. A natural COD should have a Natural manner of death, unless there is a non-natural contributory factor listed in Part 2 of the death certificate (i.e. Neglect). If the death is deemed unnatural, one of the remaining four categories of manner is to be used, as described in the following pages of this document.

There are certain recognized rules in determining manner of death that should be mentioned here. Manner of death is a medicolegal determination and should not be used to parallel or initiate judicial or legal processes. The manner of homicide does not necessarily equate to any of the degrees of murder that a State’s Attorney may charge. Conversely, the determination of accident in a motor vehicle collision without the intent to harm someone on purpose is best determined an accident, and absolutely does not prevent legal proceedings if a law was violated
associated with the collision. Accident is best used if there is no evidence of intent to harm or kill someone or themselves. Intent is important in determining a suicide. The investigation must show clear and convincing evidence of the intent to harm oneself. Some causes of death presume intent of self destruction, such as hanging in the absence of autoerotic activity. Homicide usually requires a volitional act that causes harm to someone, such as pointing a gun and pulling the trigger, or picking up a knife and moving the knife toward the person. Undetermined is a means of categorizing a death when there is equal possibility between two manners or when the circumstances are unable to be determined. If more investigative information becomes available at a later date the death certificate can be amended and an appropriate manner assigned to reflect that information.

In Illinois manner of death is determined by one of two methods 1) the coroner’s inquest or 2) direct determination by the coroner or medical examiner. Both processes require a standard procedure and quality assurance process acceptable to the office and the jurisdiction it serves.

**NATURAL**

A **Natural** death would be a death resulting solely from a natural disease and/or the aging process such as heart disease, cancer, lung disease, etc. Some examples are Atherosclerotic Heart Disease, Pneumonia, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, Small Cell Carcinoma of Lung, Pancreatitis, Septicemia from an acute urinary tract infection, etc.

**However,** some apparent natural processes must be researched as they may be caused by an outside source that is NOT natural. Some examples are: a pulmonary thromboembolism after an injury, a seizure/epilepsy disorder after a head injury, a long health deterioration after an injury of an individual in apparent good health at the time of injury/event, etc. The “but for rule” should be applied to any of these possibilities.

Consideration also needs to be given to what may appear to be a Natural death that occurs in a “hostile environment”. When a natural event occurs in a hostile environment, as when someone has a myocardial infarct while swimming, and there is a likelihood that the person was alive when the face became immersed (i.e., the person was still alive while in the hostile environment), preference is usually given to the non-natural manner unless it is clear that death occurred before entry into the hostile environment. In the example cited (drowning because of a myocardial infarct while swimming), the manner of death would be appropriately classified as Accident. In this instance, a modified “but-for” test can be applied. “But-for” the hostile environment, death would have been considerably less likely to occur when it did and may not have occurred at all.

Deaths due to chronic substance or alcohol abuse may also be considered as natural deaths as long as there was no immediate intoxication. An example would be Cirrhosis of the Liver due to Chronic Alcoholism.

**ACCIDENTAL**

When the circumstances surrounding the death occur in a volitional (willful) environment and the resulting injury or poisoning is not expected, foreseen or intended. The Coroner’s death investigation concludes there was no intent to harm or cause death, and as a result, the fatal
outcome was unintentional, but that the mishap does have a causal relationship with the person’s death. The Accidental manner of death would also be considered for deaths with the following circumstances: where an injury has possibly contributed to the cause of death, yet the injury may or may not be the primary cause of death due to the interval of time from the initial injury to resulting death (i.e. a patient who experiences a hip fracture, requires surgery and then dies of a pulmonary embolism, or the victim of a motor vehicle incident who is left in a vegetative state and dies 10 years after the fact, or a victim of a gunshot wound who is left disabled and later dies of pneumonia while on a ventilator).

Case Discussion:

A twin engine Piper Apache plane crash occurs in your jurisdiction. The burned remains of a male individual (deemed to be the pilot) are found within the aircraft. Preliminary autopsy results indicate a dissecting aortic aneurysm (naturally occurring) and multiple areas of blunt force trauma (hinge fracture, cervical disc rupture, bilateral rib fractures, right tib-fib fracture, and separation of symphysis pubis). Toxicology is negative. Transcript from air traffic control tower has pilot verbalizing engine trouble but moments prior to crash pilot is unresponsive (not answering ATC communication attempts). There are no mechanical difficulties found with the aircraft. The circumstances surrounding this death would place it into the Accidental manner of death category. Although it would seem that the pilot went unresponsive as a result of the dissecting aortic aneurysm, one cannot say for certain that this naturally occurring event caused his death prior to the crash. After impact with the ground and subsequent fire, one can say for certain that the pilot was deceased.

As a reminder, according to Illinois state statutes, factors involved in accidental deaths would include, but are not limited to:

- Asphyxia (hanging, suffocation, or choking)
- Blows or other forms of mechanical violence
- Burns
- Crushing by a falling object
- Cutting or stabbing
- Death arising from employment
- Death on the operating table prior to recovery from anesthesia or therapeutic accident
- Drowning (actual or suspected)
- Electrical Shock
- Explosion
- Exposure
- Firearms
- Fractures of bones (non pathological)
- Falls
- Carbon monoxide poisoning (exposure to natural gas or inhalation of motor vehicle exhaust or as a result of fire)
- Heat exhaustion
- Sunstroke
- Poisoning (food poisoning, occupational poisoning or other)
- Overdose
- Vehicular incident (automobile, airplane, boat, bus, train, motorcycle, bicycle or other)
SUICIDE

The Suicide classification should be considered when circumstances and evidence indicate the death was due to a self-inflicted act that was meant to do harm or cause one’s own death. A suicide note or written message left by the decedent occurs in approximately one out of every three suicides. These notes or messages can consist of a couple of words to multiple pages. Sometimes a verbal message may be left (i.e. spoken directly to another person, left on an answering machine or a recording device). Absent compelling evidence of a written note or a verbal message left the by the decedent, you may want to consider the following in determining a suicide:

- Evidence that death was self-inflicted
  - Pathological (autopsy)
  - Toxicological
  - Investigatory
  - Psychological evidence
  - Statements of the decedent or witnesses
- Evidence at the time of injury the decedent intended to kill self or wished to die and decedent understood the consequences of his/her actions
- Explicit verbal or nonverbal expression of intent to kill self
- Implicit or indirect evidence of intent to die, for example:
  - Previous suicide attempt(s) or threat(s)
  - Stressful events or significant losses (actual or threatened)
  - Serious depression or mental disorder
  - Expressing desire to die or farewells
  - Preparations of death
  - Expressions of hopelessness
- When a person has clearly committed a suicidal act, then apparently changes his/her mind, but dies as a result of the act, the manner of death may be classified as Suicide.

No single factor has gained acceptance as a universal cause of suicide. However, depression is a common phenomenon. Other factors that may be related:

- Pain
- Stress or Grief
- Crime
- Mental illness and disability
- Catastrophic Injury
- Substance abuse
- Adverse environment
- Financial loss
- Unresolved sexual issues
- To avoid shame or dishonor
- Curiosity (the need to know what comes after life)
- Boredom
- Terrorism especially when related to religion or extreme nationalism

When the death investigation reveals that the death was a direct result of a previous self-inflicted incident or injury that may have occurred days, months or years earlier and the subject never recovered from those injuries, the manner of death may be classified as Suicide.
HOMICIDE

The killing of one human being by the act or omission of another. The term applies to all such killings, whether criminal or not. Homicide is considered noncriminal in a number of situations, including deaths as the result of war and putting someone to death by the valid sentence of a court. Killing may also be legally justified or excused, as it is in cases of self-defense or when someone is killed by another person who is attempting to prevent a violent felony. Criminal homicide occurs when a person purposely, knowingly, recklessly or negligently causes the death of another. Murder and manslaughter are both examples of criminal homicide.

Methods of Homicide:

- Suffocation
- Strangulation
- Head Trauma
- Drowning
- Exposure
- Stabbing
- Gunshot

UNDETERMINED

Undetermined (or Could not be Determined) applies when the evidence does not clearly indicate one Manner of Death over another. A death may be deemed Undetermined if after a thorough investigation and careful consideration of all findings, the Coroner or Medical Examiner concludes there is insufficient information to classify the Manner of Death as an Accident, Suicide, Homicide or Natural Death. Also when a cause of death cannot be established due to circumstances, i.e. skeletalized remains, etc., the Manner of Death may also be classified as Undetermined.

Case Discussion:

Family members of a 61 year old woman contact police to do a well-being check on their mother as they had not been able to reach her by telephone for 2 days. Police respond to the home and after gaining entry find the woman in the bathtub with the water still running. It is documented that the house was secured at the time of entry and processing of the scene revealed no indication of foul play. Autopsy results were consistent with drowning.

A check of the woman’s medical records revealed she had a history of petit mall seizures and depression. It was further learned that she had not been taking her prescribed medications for these conditions because she could not afford them and did not have health insurance to cover the costs. Toxicology confirmed she had not been taking her antidepressant or seizure medications.

Because it could not be determined if this woman had a seizure that resulted in her drowning (Accident), or drowned with the intent to end her life (Suicide), it would be appropriate to classify the death of this woman as Undetermined.
CLOSING

This document is designed to be a guide or a starting point for establishing guidelines and a process for consistent Manner of Death determination for Coroner and Medical Examiners in Illinois. These are suggested guidelines and should be re-examined periodically to recommend adjustments as needed.

SELECTED REFERENCES & FURTHER READING


