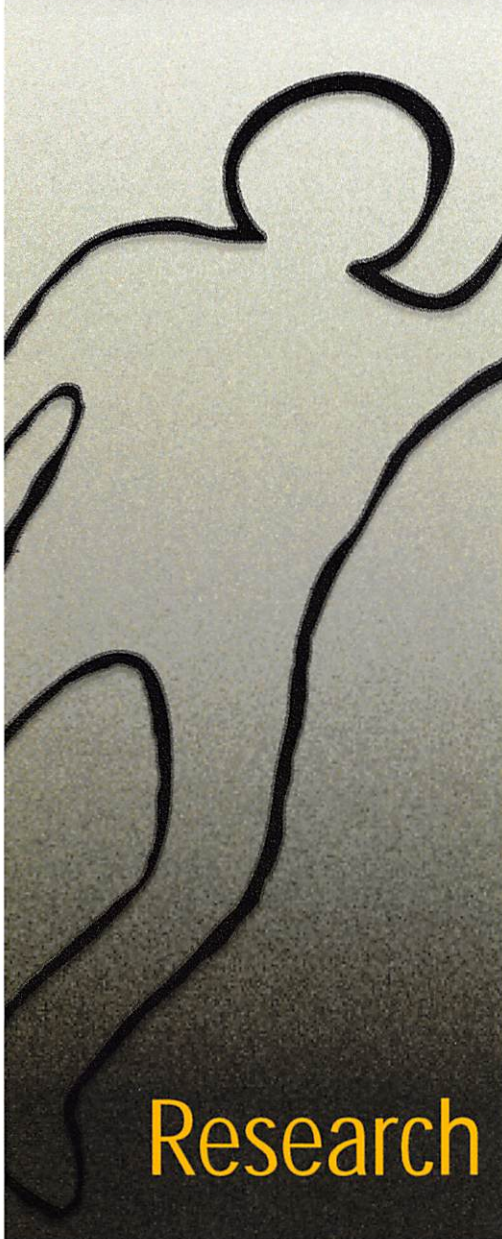




Death Investigation:

A Guide for the Scene Investigator



Every Scene.
Every Time.

Research Report



**U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
810 Seventh Street N.W.
Washington, DC 20531**

Janet Reno
Attorney General

Daniel Marcus
Acting Associate Attorney General

Laurie Robinson
Assistant Attorney General

Noël Brennan
Deputy Assistant Attorney General

Jeremy Travis
Director, National Institute of Justice

**Department of Justice Response Center:
800-421-6770**

Office of Justice Programs
World Wide Web Site:
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov>

National Institute of Justice
World Wide Web Site:
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij>

Death Investigation:

A Guide for the Scene Investigator

Developed and Approved by the
National Medicolegal Review Panel

Executive Director
Steven C. Clark, Ph.D.
Occupational Research and Assessment, Inc.
Big Rapids, Michigan
Associate Professor
Ferris State University

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.

**U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs**

**National Institute of Justice
Jeremy Travis, J.D.
Director**

**Richard M. Rau, Ph.D.
Project Monitor**

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.

Opinions or points of view expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the U.S. Department of Justice.

NCJ 167568

The National Institute of Justice is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

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

Medicolegal Death Investigation Guidelines

Section A

Investigative Tools
and Equipment

Section B

Arriving at the Scene

Section C

Documenting and
Evaluating the Scene

Section D

Documenting and
Evaluating the Body

Section E

Establishing and Recording
Decedent Profile Information

Section F

Completing the
Scene Investigation

Investigative Tools and Equipment

1. Gloves (Universal Precautions).
2. Writing implements (pens, pencils, markers).
3. Body bags.
4. Communication equipment (cell phone, pager, radio).
5. Flashlight.
6. Body ID tags.
7. Camera—35mm (with extra batteries, film, etc.).
8. Investigative notebook (for scene notes, etc.).
9. Measurement instruments (tape measure, ruler, rolling measuring tape, etc.).
10. Official identification (for yourself).
11. Watch.
12. Paper bags (for hands, feet, etc.).
13. Specimen containers (for evidence items and toxicology specimens).
14. Disinfectant (Universal Precautions).
15. Departmental scene forms.
16. Camera—Polaroid (with extra film).
17. Blood collection tubes (syringes and needles).
18. Inventory lists (clothes, drugs, etc.).
19. Paper envelopes.
20. Clean white linen sheet (stored in plastic bag).
21. Evidence tape.
22. Business cards/office cards w/phone numbers.
23. Foul-weather gear (raincoat, umbrella, etc.).
24. Medical equipment kit (scissors, forceps, tweezers, exposure suit, scalpel handle, blades, disposable syringe, large gauge needles, cotton-tipped swabs, etc.).
25. Phone listing (important phone numbers).
26. Tape or rubber bands.
27. Disposable (paper) jumpsuits, hair covers, face shield, etc.
28. Evidence seal (use with body bags/locks).

29. Pocketknife.
30. Shoe-covers.
31. Trace evidence kit (tape, etc.).
32. Waterless hand wash.
33. Thermometer.
34. Crime scene tape.
35. First aid kit.
36. Latent print kit.
37. Local maps.
38. Plastic trash bags.
39. Gunshot residue analysis kits (SEM/EDS).
40. Photo placards (signage to ID case in photo).
41. Boots (for wet conditions, construction sites, etc.).
42. Hand lens (magnifying glass).
43. Portable electric area lighting.
44. Barrier sheeting (to shield body/area from public view).
45. Purification mask (disposable).
46. Reflective vest.
47. Tape recorder.
48. Basic handtools (boltcutter, screwdrivers, hammer, shovel, trowel, paintbrushes, etc.).
49. Body bag locks (to secure body inside bag).
50. Camera—Video (with extra battery).
51. Personal comfort supplies (insect spray, sun screen, hat, etc.).
52. Presumptive blood test kit.

This handbook is intended as a guide to recommended practices for the investigation of death scenes. Jurisdictional, logistical, or legal conditions may preclude the use of particular procedures contained herein.

Arriving at the Scene

1. Introduce and Identify Self and Role

Principle: Introductions at the scene allow the investigator to establish formal contact with other official agency representatives. The investigator must identify the first responder to ascertain if any artifacts or contamination may have been introduced to the death scene. The investigator must work with all key people to ensure scene safety prior to his/her entrance into the scene.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall take the initiative to introduce himself or herself, identify essential personnel, establish rapport, and determine scene safety.

Procedure: Upon arrival at the scene, and prior to entering the scene, the investigator should:

- A. Identify the lead investigator at the scene and present identification.
- B. Identify other essential officials at the scene (e.g., law enforcement, fire, EMS, social/child protective services, etc.) and explain the investigator's role in the investigation.
- C. Identify and document the identity of the first essential official(s) to the scene (first "professional" arrival at the scene for investigative followup) to ascertain if any artifacts or contamination may have been introduced to the death scene.
- D. Determine the scene safety (prior to entry).

B

1. Introduce and Identify Self and Role

Summary:

Introductions at the scene help to establish a collaborative investigative effort. It is essential to carry identification in the event of questioned authority. It is essential to establish scene safety prior to entry.

2. Exercise Scene Safety

Principle: Determining scene safety for all investigative personnel is essential to the investigative process. The risk of environmental and physical injury must be removed prior to initiating a scene investigation. Risks can include hostile crowds, collapsing structures, traffic, and environmental and chemical threats.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall attempt to establish scene safety prior to entering the scene to prevent injury or loss of life, including contacting appropriate agencies for assistance with other scene safety issues.

Procedure: Upon arrival at the scene, the investigator should:

- A. Assess and/or establish physical boundaries.
- B. Identify incident command.
- C. Secure vehicle and park as safely as possible.
- D. Use personal protective safety devices (physical, biochemical safety).
- E. Arrange for removal of animals or secure (if present and possible).
- F. Obtain clearance/authorization to enter scene from the individual responsible for scene safety (e.g., fire marshal, disaster coordinator).

- G. While exercising scene safety, protect the integrity of the scene and evidence to the extent possible from contamination or loss by people, animals, and elements.

Note: Due to potential scene hazards (e.g., crowd control, collapsing structures, poisonous gases, traffic), the body may have to be removed before scene investigation can be continued.

Summary:

Environmental and physical threats to the investigator must be removed in order to conduct a scene investigation safely. Protective devices must be used by investigative staff to prevent injury. The investigator must endeavor to protect the evidence against contamination or loss.

3. Confirm or Pronounce Death

Principle: Appropriate personnel must make a determination of death prior to the initiation of the death investigation. The confirmation or pronouncement of death determines jurisdictional responsibilities.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall ensure that appropriate personnel have viewed the body and that death has been confirmed.

Procedure: Upon arrival at the scene, the investigator should:

- A. Locate and view the body.
- B. Check for pulse, respiration, and reflexes, as appropriate.
- C. Identify and document the individual who made the official determination of death, including the date and time of determination.
- D. Ensure death is pronounced, as required.

3. Confirm or Pronounce Death

Summary:

Once death has been determined, rescue/resuscitative efforts cease and medicolegal jurisdiction can be established. It is vital that this occur prior to the medical examiner/coroner's assuming any responsibilities.

4. Participate in Scene Briefing (With Attending Agency Representatives)

Principle: Scene investigators must recognize the varying jurisdictional and statutory responsibilities that apply to individual agency representatives (e.g., law enforcement, fire, EMT, judicial/legal). Determining each agency's investigative responsibility at the scene is essential in planning the scope and depth of each scene investigation and the release of information to the public.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall identify specific responsibilities, share appropriate preliminary information, and establish investigative goals of each agency present at the scene.

Procedure: When participating in scene briefing, the investigator should:

- A. Locate the staging area (entry point to scene, command post, etc.).
- B. Document the scene location (address, mile marker, building name) consistent with other agencies.
- C. Determine nature and scope of investigation by obtaining preliminary investigative details (e.g., suspicious versus nonsuspicious death).
- D. Ensure that initial accounts of incident are obtained from the first witness(es).

Summary:

Scene briefing allows for initial and factual information exchange. This includes scene location, time factors, initial witness information, agency responsibilities, and investigative strategy.

5. Conduct Scene "Walk Through"

Principle: Conducting a scene "walk through" provides the investigator with an overview of the entire scene. The "walk through" provides the investigator with the first opportunity to locate and view the body, identify valuable and/or fragile evidence, and determine initial investigative procedures providing for a systematic examination and documentation of the scene and body.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall conduct a scene "walk through" to establish pertinent scene parameters.

Procedure: Upon arrival at the scene, the investigator should:

- A. Reassess scene boundaries and adjust as appropriate.
- B. Establish a path of entry and exit.
- C. Identify visible physical and fragile evidence.
- D. Document and photograph fragile evidence immediately and collect if appropriate.
- E. Locate and view the decedent.

Summary:

The initial scene "walk through" is essential to minimize scene disturbance and to prevent the loss and/or contamination of physical and fragile evidence.

6. Establish Chain of Custody

Principle: Ensuring the integrity of the evidence by establishing and maintaining a chain of custody is vital to an investigation. This will safeguard against subsequent allegations of tampering, theft, planting, and contamination of evidence.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: Prior to the removal of any evidence, the custodian(s) of evidence shall be designated and shall generate and maintain a chain of custody for all evidence collected.

Procedure: Throughout the investigation, those responsible for preserving the chain of custody should:

- A. Document location of the scene and time of arrival of the death investigator at the scene.
- B. Determine custodian(s) of evidence, determine which agency(ies) is/are responsible for collection of specific types of evidence, and determine evidence collection priority for fragile/fleeting evidence.
- C. Identify, secure, and preserve evidence with proper containers, labels, and preservatives.
- D. Document the collection of evidence by recording its location at the scene, time of collection, and time and location of disposition.
- E. Develop personnel lists, witness lists, and documentation of times of arrival and departure of personnel.

Summary:

It is essential to maintain a proper chain of custody for evidence. Through proper documentation, collection, and preservation, the integrity of the evidence can be assured. A properly maintained chain of custody and prompt transfer will reduce the likelihood of a challenge to the integrity of the evidence.

7. Follow Laws (Related to the Collection of Evidence)

Principle: The investigator must follow local, State, and Federal laws for the collection of evidence to ensure its admissibility. The investigator must work with law enforcement and the legal authorities to determine laws regarding collection of evidence.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator working with other agencies must identify and work under appropriate legal authority. Modification of informal procedures may be necessary but laws must always be followed.

Procedure: The investigator, prior to or upon arrival at the death scene, should work with other agencies to:

- A. Determine the need for a search warrant (discuss with appropriate agencies).
- B. Identify local, State, Federal, and international laws (discuss with appropriate agencies).
- C. Identify medical examiner/coroner statutes and/or office standard operating procedures (discuss with appropriate agencies).

Summary:

Following laws related to the collection of evidence will ensure a complete and proper investigation in compliance with State and local laws, admissibility in court, and adherence to office policies and protocols.

Documenting and Evaluating the Scene

1. Photograph Scene

Principle: The photographic documentation of the scene creates a permanent historical record of the scene. Photographs provide detailed corroborating evidence that constructs a system of redundancy should questions arise concerning the report, witness statements, or position of evidence at the scene.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall obtain detailed photographic documentation of the scene that provides both instant and permanent high-quality (e.g., 35 mm) images.

Procedure: Upon arrival at the scene, and prior to moving the body or evidence, the investigator should:

- A. Remove all nonessential personnel from the scene.
- B. Obtain an overall (wide-angle) view of the scene to spatially locate the specific scene to the surrounding area.
- C. Photograph specific areas of the scene to provide more detailed views of specific areas within the larger scene.
- D. Photograph the scene from different angles to provide various perspectives that may uncover additional evidence.
- E. Obtain some photographs with scales to document specific evidence.
- F. Obtain photographs even if the body or other evidence has been moved.

C

1. Photograph Scene

Note: If evidence has been moved prior to photography, it should be noted in the report, but the body or other evidence should not be reintroduced into the scene in order to take photographs.

Summary:

Photography allows for the best permanent documentation of the death scene. It is essential that accurate scene photographs are available for other investigators, agencies, and authorities to recreate the scene. Photographs are a permanent record of the terminal event and retain evidentiary value and authenticity. It is essential that the investigator obtain accurate photographs before releasing the scene.

2. Develop Descriptive Documentation of the Scene

Principle: Written documentation of the scene(s) provides a permanent record that may be used to correlate with and enhance photographic documentation, refresh recollections, and record observations.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: Investigators shall provide written scene documentation.

Procedure: After photographic documentation of the scene and prior to removal of the body or other evidence, the investigator should:

- A. Diagram/describe in writing items of evidence and their relationship to the body with necessary measurements.
- B. Describe and document, with necessary measurements, blood and body fluid evidence including volume, patterns, spatters, and other characteristics.

- C. Describe scene environments including odors, lights, temperatures, and other fragile evidence.

Note: If evidence has been moved prior to written documentation, it should be noted in the report.

Summary:

Written scene documentation is essential to correlate with photographic evidence and to recreate the scene for police, forensic(s), and judicial and civil agencies with a legitimate interest.

3. Establish Probable Location of Injury or Illness

Principle: The location where the decedent is found may not be the actual location where the injury/illness that contributed to the death occurred. It is imperative that the investigator attempt to determine the locations of any and all injury(ies)/illness(es) that may have contributed to the death. Physical evidence at any and all locations may be pertinent in establishing the cause, manner, and circumstances of death.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall obtain detailed information regarding any and all probable locations associated with the individual's death.

Procedure: The investigator should:

- A. Document location where death was confirmed.
- B. Determine location from which decedent was transported and how body was transported to scene.

3. Establish Probable Location of Injury or Illness

- C. Identify and record discrepancies in rigor mortis, livor mortis, and body temperature.
- D. Check body, clothing, and scene for consistency/inconsistency of trace evidence and indicate location where artifacts are found.
- E. Check for drag marks (on body and ground).
- F. Establish post-injury activity.
- G. Obtain dispatch (e.g., police, ambulance) record(s).
- H. Interview family members and associates as needed.

Summary:

Due to post-injury survival, advances in emergency medical services, multiple modes of transportation, the availability of specialized care, or criminal activity, a body may be moved from the actual location of illness/injury to a remote site. It is imperative that the investigator attempt to determine any and all locations where the decedent has previously been and the mode of transport from these sites.

4. Collect, Inventory, and Safeguard Property and Evidence

Principle: The decedent's valuables/property must be safeguarded to ensure proper processing and eventual return to next of kin. Evidence on or near the body must be safeguarded to ensure its availability for further evaluation.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall ensure that all property and evidence is collected, inventoried, safeguarded, and released as required by law.

Procedure: After personal property and evidence have been identified at the scene, the investigator (with a witness) should:

- A. Inventory, collect, and safeguard illicit drugs and paraphernalia at scene and/or office.
- B. Inventory, collect, and safeguard prescription medication at scene and/or office.
- C. Inventory, collect, and safeguard over-the-counter medications at scene and/or office.
- D. Inventory, collect, and safeguard money at scene and at office.
- E. Inventory, collect, and safeguard personal valuables/property at scene and at office.

Summary:

Personal property and evidence are important items at a death investigation. Evidence must be safeguarded to ensure its availability if needed for future evaluation and litigation. Personal property must be safeguarded to ensure its eventual distribution to appropriate agencies or individuals and to reduce the likelihood that the investigator will be accused of stealing property.

5. Interview Witness(es) at the Scene

Principle: The documented comments of witnesses at the scene allow the investigator to obtain primary source data regarding discovery of body, witness corroboration, and terminal history. The documented interview provides essential information for the investigative process.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator's report shall include the source of information, including specific statements and information provided by the witness.

5. Interview Witness(es) at the Scene

Procedure: Upon arriving at the scene, the investigator should:

- A. Collect all available identifying data on witnesses (e.g., full name, address, DOB, work and home telephone numbers, etc.).
- B. Establish witness' relationship/association to the deceased.
- C. Establish the basis of witness' knowledge (how does witness have knowledge of the death?).
- D. Obtain information from each witness.
- E. Note discrepancies from the scene briefing (challenge, explain, verify statements).
- F. Tape statements where such equipment is available and retain them.

Summary:

The final report must document witness' identity and must include a summary of witness' statements, corroboration with other witnesses, and the circumstances of discovery of the death. This documentation must exist as a permanent record to establish a chain of events.

Documenting and Evaluating the Body

1. Photograph the Body

Principle: The photographic documentation of the body at the scene creates a permanent record that preserves essential details of the body position, appearance, identity, and final movements. Photographs allow sharing of information with other agencies investigating the death.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall obtain detailed photographic documentation of the body that provides both instant and permanent high-quality (e.g., 35 mm) images.

Procedure: Upon arrival at the scene, and prior to moving the body or evidence, the investigator should:

- A. Photograph the body and immediate scene (including the decedent as initially found).
- B. Photograph the decedent's face.
- C. Take additional photographs after removal of objects/items that interfere with photographic documentation of the decedent (e.g., body removed from car).
- D. Photograph the decedent with and without measurements (as appropriate).
- E. Photograph the surface beneath the body (after the body has been removed, as appropriate).

Note: Never clean face, do not change condition. Take multiple shots if possible.

D

1. Photograph the Body

Summary:

The photographic documentation of the body at the scene provides for documentation of the body position, identity, and appearance. The details of the body at the scene provide investigators with pertinent information of the terminal events.

2. Conduct External Body Examination (Superficial)

Principle: Conducting the external body examination provides the investigator with objective data regarding the single most important piece of evidence at the scene, the body. This documentation provides detailed information regarding the decedent's physical attributes, his/her relationship to the scene, and possible cause, manner, and circumstances of death.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall obtain detailed photographs and written documentation of the decedent at the scene.

Procedure: After arrival at the scene and prior to moving the decedent, the investigator should, without removing decedent's clothing:

- A. Photograph the scene, including the decedent as initially found and the surface beneath the body after the body has been removed.

Note: If necessary, take additional photographs after removal of objects/items that interfere with photographic documentation of the decedent.

- B. Photograph the decedent with and without measurements (as appropriate), including a photograph of the decedent's face.

- C. Document the decedent's position with and without measurements (as appropriate).
- D. Document the decedent's physical characteristics.
- E. Document the presence or absence of clothing and personal effects.
- F. Document the presence or absence of any items/objects that may be relevant.
- G. Document the presence or absence of marks, scars, and tattoos.
- H. Document the presence or absence of injury/trauma, petechiae, etc.
- I. Document the presence of treatment or resuscitative efforts.
- J. Based on the findings, determine the need for further evaluation/assistance of forensic specialists (e.g., pathologists, odontologists).

Summary:

Thorough evaluation and documentation (photographic and written) of the deceased at the scene is essential to determine the depth and direction the investigation will take.

3. Preserve Evidence (on Body)

Principle: The photographic and written documentation of evidence on the body allows the investigator to obtain a permanent historical record of that evidence. To maintain chain of custody, evidence must be collected, preserved, and transported properly. In addition to all of the physical evidence visible on the body, blood and other body fluids present must be photographed and documented prior to collection and transport. Fragile evidence (that which can be easily contaminated, lost, or altered) must also be collected and/or preserved to maintain chain of custody and to assist in determination of cause, manner, and circumstances of death.

3. Preserve Evidence (on Body)

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: With photographic and written documentation, the investigator will provide a permanent record of evidence that is on the body.

Procedure: Once evidence on the body is recognized, the investigator should:

- A. Photograph the evidence.
- B. Document blood/body fluid on the body (froth/purge, substances from orifices), location, and pattern before transporting.
- C. Place decedent's hands and/or feet in unused paper bags (as determined by the scene).
- D. Collect trace evidence before transporting the body (e.g., blood, hair, fibers, etc.).
- E. Arrange for the collection and transport of evidence at the scene (when necessary).
- F. Ensure the proper collection of blood and body fluids for subsequent analysis (if body will be released from scene to an outside agency without an autopsy).

Summary:

It is essential that evidence be collected, preserved, transported, and documented in an orderly and proper fashion to ensure the chain of custody and admissibility in a legal action. The preservation and documentation of the evidence on the body must be initiated by the investigator at the scene to prevent alterations or contamination.

4. Establish Decedent Identification

Principle: The establishment or confirmation of the decedent's identity is paramount to the death investigation. Proper identification allows notification of next of kin, settlement of estates, resolution of criminal and civil litigation, and the proper completion of the death certificate.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall engage in a diligent effort to establish/confirm the decedent's identity.

Procedure: To establish identity, the investigator should document use of the following methods:

- A. Direct visual or photographic identification of the decedent if visually recognizable.
- B. Scientific methods such as fingerprints, dental, radiographic, and DNA comparisons.
- C. Circumstantial methods such as (but not restricted to) personal effects, circumstances, physical characteristics, tattoos, and anthropologic data.

Summary:

There are several methods available that can be used to properly identify deceased persons. This is essential for investigative, judicial, family, and vital records issues.

5. Document Post Mortem Changes

Principle: The documenting of post mortem changes to the body assists the investigator in explaining body appearance in the interval following death. Inconsistencies between post

5. Document Post Mortem Changes

mortem changes and body location may indicate movement of body and validate or invalidate witness statements. In addition, post mortem changes to the body, when correlated with circumstantial information, can assist the investigators in estimating the approximate time of death.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall document all post mortem changes relative to the decedent and the environment.

Procedure: Upon arrival at the scene and prior to moving the body, the investigator should note the presence of each of the following in his/her report:

- A. Livor (color, location, blanchability, Tardieu spots) consistent/inconsistent with position of the body.
- B. Rigor (stage/intensity, location on the body, broken, inconsistent with the scene).
- C. Degree of decomposition (putrefaction, adipocere, mummification, skeletonization, as appropriate).
- D. Insect and animal activity.
- E. Scene temperature (document method used and time estimated).
- F. Description of body temperature (e.g., warm, cold, frozen) or measurement of body temperature (document method used and time of measurement).

Summary:

Documentation of post mortem changes in every report is essential to determine an accurate cause and manner of death, provide information as to the time of death, corroborate witness statements, and indicate that the body may have been moved after death.

6. Participate in Scene Debriefing

Principle: The scene debriefing helps investigators from all participating agencies to establish post-scene responsibilities by sharing data regarding particular scene findings. The scene debriefing provides each agency the opportunity for input regarding special requests for assistance, additional information, special examinations, and other requests requiring interagency communication, cooperation, and education.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall participate in or initiate inter-agency scene debriefing to verify specific post-scene responsibilities.

Procedure: When participating in scene debriefing, the investigator should:

- A. Determine post-scene responsibilities (identification, notification, press relations, and evidence transportation).
- B. Determine/identify the need for a specialist (e.g., crime laboratory technicians, social services, entomologists, OSHA).
- C. Communicate with the pathologist about responding to the scene or to the autopsy schedule (as needed).
- D. Share investigative data (as required in furtherance of the investigation).
- E. Communicate special requests to appropriate agencies, being mindful of the necessity for confidentiality.

Summary:

The scene debriefing is the best opportunity for investigative participants to communicate special requests and confirm all current and additional scene responsibilities. The debriefing allows participants the opportunity to establish clear lines of responsibility for a successful investigation.

7. Determine Notification Procedures (Next of Kin)

Principle: Every reasonable effort should be made to notify the next of kin as soon as possible. Notification of next of kin initiates closure for the family, disposition of remains, and facilitates the collection of additional information relative to the case.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall ensure that next of kin is notified of the death and that all failed and successful attempts at notification are documented.

Procedure: When determining notification procedures, the investigator should:

- A. Identify next of kin (determine who will perform task).
- B. Locate next of kin (determine who will perform task).
- C. Notify next of kin (assign person(s) to perform task) and record time of notification, or, if delegated to another agency, gain confirmation when notification is made.
- D. Notify concerned agencies of status of the notification.

Summary:

The investigator is responsible for ensuring that the next of kin is identified, located, and notified in a timely manner. The time and method of notification should be documented. Failure to locate next of kin and efforts to do so should be a matter of record. This ensures that every reasonable effort has been made to contact the family.

8. Ensure Security of Remains

Principle: Ensuring security of the body requires the investigator to supervise the labeling, packaging, and removal of the remains. An appropriate identification tag is placed on the body to preclude misidentification upon receipt at the examining agency. This function also includes safeguarding all potential physical evidence and/or property and clothing that remain on the body.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall supervise and ensure the proper identification, inventory, and security of evidence/property and its packaging and removal from the scene.

Procedure: Prior to leaving the scene, the investigator should:

- A. Ensure that the body is protected from further trauma or contamination (if not, document) and unauthorized removal of therapeutic and resuscitative equipment.
- B. Inventory and secure property, clothing, and personal effects that are on the body (remove in a controlled environment with witness present).
- C. Identify property and clothing to be retained as evidence (in a controlled environment).
- D. Recover blood and/or vitreous samples prior to release of remains.
- E. Place identification on the body and body bag.
- F. Ensure/supervise the placement of the body into the bag.
- G. Ensure/supervise the removal of the body from the scene.
- H. Secure transportation.

8. Ensure Security of Remains

Summary:

Ensuring the security of the remains facilitates proper identification of the remains, maintains a proper chain of custody, and safeguards property and evidence.

Establishing and Recording Decedent Profile Information

1. Document the Discovery History

Principle: Establishing a decedent profile includes documenting a discovery history and circumstances surrounding the discovery. The basic profile will dictate subsequent levels of investigation, jurisdiction, and authority. The focus (breadth/depth) of further investigation is dependent on this information.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall document the discovery history, available witnesses, and apparent circumstances leading to death.

Procedure: For an investigator to correctly document the discovery history, he/she should:

- A. Establish and record person(s) who discovered the body and when.
- B. Document the circumstances surrounding the discovery (who, what, where, when, how).

Summary:

The investigator must produce clear, concise, documented information concerning who discovered the body, what are the circumstances of discovery, where the discovery occurred, when the discovery was made, and how the discovery was made.

E

2. Determine Terminal Episode History

Principle: Pre-terminal circumstances play a significant role in determining cause and manner of death. Documentation of medical intervention and/or procurement of ante mortem specimens help to establish the decedent's condition prior to death.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall document known circumstances and medical intervention preceding death.

Procedure: In order for the investigator to determine terminal episode history, he/she should:

- A. Document when, where, how, and by whom decedent was last known to be alive.
- B. Document the incidents prior to the death.
- C. Document complaints/symptoms prior to the death.
- D. Document and review complete EMS records (including the initial electrocardiogram).
- E. Obtain relevant medical records (copies).
- F. Obtain relevant ante mortem specimens.

Summary:

Obtaining records of pre-terminal circumstances and medical history distinguishes medical treatment from trauma. This history and relevant ante mortem specimens assist the medical examiner/coroner in determining cause and manner of death.

3. Document Decedent Medical History

Principle: The majority of deaths referred to the medical examiner/coroner are natural deaths. Establishing the decedent's medical history helps to focus the investigation. Documenting the decedent's medical signs or symptoms prior to death determines the need for subsequent examinations. The relationship between disease and injury may play a role in the cause, manner, and circumstances of death.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall obtain the decedent's past medical history.

Procedure: Through interviews and review of the written records, the investigator should:

- A. Document medical history, including medications taken, alcohol and drug use, and family medical history from family members and witnesses.
- B. Document information from treating physicians and/or hospitals to confirm history and treatment.
- C. Document physical characteristics and traits (e.g., left-/right-handedness, missing appendages, tattoos, etc.).

Summary:

Obtaining a thorough medical history focuses the investigation, aids in disposition of the case, and helps determine the need for a post mortem examination or other laboratory tests or studies.

4. Document Decedent Mental Health History

Principle: The decedent's mental health history can provide insight into the behavior/state of mind of the individual. That insight may produce clues that will aid in establishing the cause, manner, and circumstances of the death.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall obtain information from sources familiar with the decedent pertaining to the decedent's mental health history.

Procedure: The investigator should:

- A. Document the decedent's mental health history, including hospitalizations and medications.
- B. Document the history of suicidal ideations, gestures, and/or attempts.
- C. Document mental health professionals (e.g., psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, etc.) who treated the decedent.
- D. Document family mental health history.

Summary:

Knowledge of the mental health history allows the investigator to evaluate properly the decedent's state of mind and contributes to the determination of cause, manner, and circumstances of death.

5. Document Social History

Principle: Social history includes marital, family, sexual, educational, employment, and financial information. Daily routines, habits and activities, and friends and associates of the decedent help in developing the decedent's profile. This information will aid in establishing the cause, manner, and circumstances of death.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall obtain social history information from sources familiar with the decedent.

Procedure: When collecting relevant social history information, the investigator should:

- A. Document marital/domestic history.
- B. Document family history (similar deaths, significant dates).
- C. Document sexual history.
- D. Document employment history.
- E. Document financial history.
- F. Document daily routines, habits, and activities.
- G. Document relationships, friends, and associates.
- H. Document religious, ethnic, or other pertinent information (e.g., religious objection to autopsy).
- I. Document educational background.
- J. Document criminal history.

Summary:

Information from sources familiar with the decedent pertaining to the decedent's social history assists in determining cause, manner, and circumstances of death.

Completing the Scene Investigation

1. Maintain Jurisdiction Over the Body

Principle: Maintaining jurisdiction over the body allows the investigator to protect the chain of custody as the body is transported from the scene for autopsy, specimen collection, or storage.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall maintain jurisdiction of the body by arranging for the body to be transported for autopsy, specimen collection, or storage by secure conveyance.

Procedure: When maintaining jurisdiction over the body, the investigator should:

- A. Arrange for, and document, secure transportation of the body to a medical or autopsy facility for further examination or storage.
- B. Coordinate and document procedures to be performed when the body is received at the facility.

Summary:

By providing documented secure transportation of the body from the scene to an authorized receiving facility, the investigator maintains jurisdiction and protects chain of custody of the body.

F

2. Release Jurisdiction of the Body

Principle: Prior to releasing jurisdiction of the body to an authorized receiving agent or funeral director, it is necessary to determine the person responsible for certification of the death. Information to complete the death certificate includes demographic information and the date, time, and location of death.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall obtain sufficient data to enable completion of the death certificate and release of jurisdiction over the body.

Procedure: When releasing jurisdiction over the body, the investigator should:

- A. Determine who will sign the death certificate (name, agency, etc.).
- B. Confirm the date, time, and location of death.
- C. Collect, when appropriate, blood, vitreous fluid, and other evidence prior to release of the body from the scene.
- D. Document and arrange with the authorized receiving agent to reconcile all death certificate information.
- E. Release the body to a funeral director or other authorized receiving agent.

Summary:

The investigator releases jurisdiction only after determining who will sign the death certificate; documenting the date, time, and location of death; collecting appropriate specimens; and releasing the body to the funeral director or other authorized receiving agent.

3. Perform Exit Procedures

Principle: Bringing closure to the scene investigation ensures that important evidence has been collected and the scene has been processed. In addition, a systematic review of the scene ensures that artifacts or equipment are not inadvertently left behind (e.g., used disposable gloves, paramedical debris, film wrappers, etc.), and any dangerous materials or conditions have been reported.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: At the conclusion of the scene investigation, the investigator shall conduct a post-investigative “walk through” and ensure the scene investigation is complete.

Procedure: When performing exit procedures, the investigator should:

- A. Identify, inventory, and remove all evidence collected at the scene.
- B. Remove all personal equipment and materials from the scene.
- C. Report and document any dangerous materials or conditions.

Summary:

Conducting a scene “walk through” upon exit ensures that all evidence has been collected, that materials are not inadvertently left behind, and that any dangerous materials or conditions have been reported to the proper entities.

4. Assist the Family

Principle: The investigator provides the family with a timetable so they can arrange for final disposition and provides information on available community and professional resources that may assist the family.

Authorization: Medical Examiner/Coroner Official Office Policy Manual; State or Federal Statutory Authority.

Policy: The investigator shall offer the decedent's family information regarding available community and professional resources.

Procedure: When the investigator is assisting the family, it is important to:

- A. Inform the family if an autopsy is required.
- B. Inform the family of available support services (e.g., victim assistance, police, social services, etc.).
- C. Inform the family of appropriate agencies to contact with questions (medical examiner/coroner offices, law enforcement, SIDS support group, etc.).
- D. Ensure family is not left alone with body (if circumstances warrant).
- E. Inform the family of approximate body release timetable.
- F. Inform the family of information release timetable (toxicology, autopsy results, etc., as required).
- G. Inform the family of available reports, including cost, if any.

Summary:

The interaction with the family allows the investigator to assist and direct them to appropriate resources. It is essential that families be given a timetable of events so that they can make necessary arrangements. In addition, the investigator needs to make them aware of what and when information will be available.