

## Role

*In all Washington State Coroner offices, the administrator of the medicolegal system is an elected official.*

**TRUE**

However, whether it a Medical Examiner or Coroner County, the key to the role is administrator. The two systems both employ board certified Forensic Pathologists and Investigators.

*There are no pre-requisites to run for the role of County Coroner.*

**TRUE**

However, the Washington Association of County Coroners and Medical Examiners have been pursuing legislation requiring all County Coroners to receive national certification within 24 months of taking office. This effort dates back to 2012, and is the focus of the organizations policy goals.

*Elected officials are not cutting open dead bodies, but are struggling to find people who can.*

**SOMEWHAT TRUE**

Currently every county in the State of Washington has either a staff Forensic Pathologist or a direct agreement/contract with a Forensic Pathologist. Smaller counties have contracts with larger neighboring counties who have fully staffed morgues. There however is a national shortage of Forensic Pathologists in the entire field.

*A Forensic Pathologist is the same as a Medical Examiner.*

**FALSE**

A Medical Examiner or Coroner is a title of the chief medicolegal leadership position within their respective offices. Forensic Pathologists are medically trained to conduct the autopsy but not in scene investigations. The same is true with investigators, they are trained to conduct the investigation to provide information to the forensic pathologist. The autopsy is used to confirm or dispute the data obtained during the investigation. The two positions and skills work together as the foundation of a medicolegal system in a county.

*Only six counties in the state rely on the work of a Medical Examiner, a doctor who specializes in forensic pathology*

**TRUE**

Only six counties are Medical Examiner counties. Medical Examiners are highly trained medical practitioners. However, the role is a leadership position like the Coroner and may not involve conducting actual autopsies. Both hire board certified Forensic Pathologists to conduct autopsies per nationally accepted practices and guidelines. Similarly, like a Coroner, the Medical Examiner also is in charge of hiring Investigators to conduct scene investigations, assist law enforcement or other first responder agencies, and obtain investigative data from the scene and historical records.

## Death Investigations

*Death determinations are essential for our knowledge about suicide, murder, and important public health outcomes.*

**TRUE**

That is why, no matter if a county is a Medical Examiner or Coroner county they have access to, and hire board certified Forensic Pathologists and Investigators to conduct an investigation into the cause and manner of death.

*Autopsies provide closure for families with questions about the sudden death of a loved one.*

**TRUE**

This is why state RCW requires training in infant death for all medicolegal practitioners, vital records forms are standardized, and autopsies are conducted on all homicides. However, the Coroner system has the additional ability to call an inquest to insure all the facts are presented.

*Contract Forensic Pathologists lack information such as photographs medical records.*

**FALSE**

Part of the state’s basic death investigation course includes the collection of evidence to include photos, medical records, etc. It is the responsibility of the Forensic Pathologist to communicate with the Investigator if they need additional information. This is accomplished with an open line of communication and understanding within the respective offices.

*Small counties have to partner with Medical Examiner counties for morgue and autopsy services.*

**FALSE**

While some small counties contract with Medical Examiner offices, Coroner counties often partner with larger Coroner counties for the same services. For example, Benton, Grant, Yakima, Kitsap, Thurston, Lewis, and Cowlitz counties all partner with smaller jurisdictions offering their fully operational and nationally accredited morgues.

*Investigation times in small counties take longer due to travel times for the body to go to out of area morgues.*

**MOSTLY FALSE**

While in some cases investigations tend to lag, most of the time it is due to backlogs at state ran toxicology labs. Coroner counties typically return bodies to identified family members within 24-48 hours as a matter of practice. In a regionalized setting such as systems with a state ran Medical Examiner transport, storage and processing times are far greater than the 24-48 hour window.

## Training

*Coroners, lacking training, draw blood and attempt to interpret toxicology results using textbooks and supplies they buy online.*

**FALSE**

While textbooks and supplies can be found online in 2020, it is not the source of the training. Drawing blood and testing is part of the national certification process, and the medicolegal practitioner is trained by a Forensic Pathologist, as part of the basic death investigators course, and is tested and reviewed in accordance with national certification standards.

*It is important to have trained professionals responding to your family’s death(s).*

**TRUE**

Trained, certified, personnel are essential to the timely and efficient care needed in responding to the death of a loved one; as well as unattended deaths. Washington State Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners strongly advocate for legislation to require the certification of all medicolegal practitioners.

A statewide ME model creates a delayed response from an Investigative role. In such cases, law enforcement is not trained in medicolegal processing of the scene/body and would be an inadequate substitute. Additionally, creating a centralized system creates another layer to step through, and erodes local accountability to families dealing with trauma.

*Performance standards set by the National Association of Medical Examiners recommend forensic pathologists perform no more than 250 autopsies in a year, to minimize mistakes*

**TRUE**

That is why the Washington Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners have strongly advocated for the certification of all medicolegal practitioners, the accreditation of all operational morgues, and incentives to recruit Forensic Pathologists to the state. Currently there are fewer than 500 Forensic Pathologists nationwide. This creates a shortage that will exist with a Medical Examiner, Coroner, or mixed model no matter if it is centralized, regionalized, or operated by county.