

# **SPOKANE COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE**

## **Statement of Policy, Procedure and Practice**

### **Policy Title:        DEFINITION OF DEATHS REPORTABLE TO THE MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE**

#### **Policy:**

The Spokane County Medical Examiner's Office may assume jurisdiction for reported deaths in accordance with RCW 68.50.010 [*Jurisdiction Over Remains*]. The authority and responsibility for making a decision as to whether jurisdiction will be assumed or released rests with the Medical Examiner's Office. Jurisdiction will not be assumed in all reported deaths.

Deaths must be reported to the Medical Examiner's Office promptly. Deaths may be reported by individuals, agencies, hospitals, law enforcement, and community groups. The Medical Examiner's Office assumes responsibility for educating the community in regard to what types of cases come under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner's system.

The Medical investigations and/or autopsy report(s) will reflect the reason for Medical Examiner jurisdiction for each investigated case.

#### **Procedures and Practices:**

##### **Reporting of Deaths:**

Deaths coming under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner system, as defined in Washington State law, are to be reported to the Medical Examiner's office promptly. Typically, cases are reported via law enforcement agencies, physicians, or hospital personnel.

- Law enforcement agencies report all unexpected home deaths, any suspicious deaths, and any deaths which appear to be unnatural.
- Hospitals and physicians are also required to report the categories of death defined in the State law. On a biannual basis, the Medical Examiner's Office will remind the hospitals in writing of the types of cases that come under the jurisdiction of the ME system.
- Home health care agencies, hospice and nursing homes report deaths in similar categories to hospitals (resulting from injuries, drug use, or delayed homicides, etc.)

- All death certificates signed in Spokane County are reviewed by Vital Records of the Spokane Health District. Along with the Medical Examiner's Office, the Vital Records staff works to remind local physicians of their responsibilities in reporting categories of deaths defined in the statute.
- The Electronic Death Registration System flags cases for the Medical Examiner's Office based on key words.

The Medical Examiner's Office will accept notification from any person who has become aware of a death that might fall under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner's system or who inquires about the potential reportability of any death. Funeral Homes are also encouraged to report any death which they believe would typically fall under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner's Office.

### **Acceptance/Release of Medical Examiner Cases:**

All reported deaths are to be screened by the Medical Investigators with consultation as needed with the forensic pathologist or chief autopsy assistant on-call. The investigator should inquire as to the nature of the death and gather sufficient information on which to base a determination as to whether Medical Examiner jurisdiction should be assumed or released.

The decision as to whether jurisdiction is accepted or released rests solely with the Medical Examiner's Office, not the reporting individual or agency. Staff will take opportunities to inform reporting individuals as to the statutory guidelines and dispel some of the myths and misunderstandings concerning jurisdiction and public death investigation.

In cases of reported deaths that are determined not to fall within the Medical Examiner's Office jurisdiction, a *Jurisdiction Released* (JR) written record is to be made, both as a computer database entry and a printed hard copy kept in the corresponding case file. The JR decision is ultimately the responsibility of the Medical Examiners.

The Medical Examiner's Office will make every effort to insure that determinations surrounding Medical Examiner's jurisdiction are decided as rapidly as possible.

Each and every case that is reported to the Medical Examiner's Office will generate a case report, which then becomes either a part of the *Jurisdiction Assumed* (JA) database category or *Jurisdiction Released* (JR) database category. Both categories of reports are all individually reviewed by a medical examiner to verify the JA/JR determination. The medical examiner reviewing the case will select and circle the correct category (*Jurisdiction Assumed* (JA), *Jurisdiction Released* (JR), and *Jurisdiction Assumed for the purposes of signing the death certificate* (JA/DC). This

Medical Examiner will initial the hard copy, that eventually becomes part of the permanent case file.

The reason which best describes why an investigation is to be performed is to be made a part of the written record and included in the investigative communiqué.

- *NOTE: After investigation, jurisdiction can be released in some deaths.*

(1) **SUDDEN OR (2) UNATTENDED**

- Death occurred suddenly when in apparent good health without medical attendance within the 36 hours preceding death.

(3) **SUSPICIOUS**

- The circumstances of death indicate death was caused by unnatural or unlawful means or where death occurs under otherwise suspicious circumstances.

(4) **EVIDENCE OF VIOLENCE**

- Acute violence; or if remote injury occurred and such injury is felt to be related to death.

(5) **IN JAIL OR PRISON**

(6) **EVIDENCE OF VIOLENT CONTAGIOUS DISEASE**

- Which may be a public health hazard.

(7) **FOUND DEAD OR UNCLAIMED**

- Where a body is found dead or is not claimed by relatives or friends.

(8) **ALL PREMATURE AND STILLBORN INFANTS**

(9) **UNIDENTIFIED DECEDENTS OR DEATHS IN WHICH IDENTITY IS QUESTIONED**

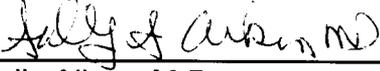
Although the RCW requires reporting if a decedent was in apparent good health, and did not have medical attendance within 36 hours preceding death, in Spokane County (by convention) many deaths that occur within 24 hours of hospital admission are reported, whether or not health was good and the death is attended.

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Until 2019, certain agencies such as nursing homes reported all non-traumatic, non-suspicious deaths in their facilities by facsimile using an "Outside Agency Reporting form".

**References:**

RCW 68.50.010 Coroner's Jurisdiction over remains (see attached copy)

 _____ Sally Aiken, M.D. Medical Examiner	<u>7/19/19</u> Date	 _____ John D. Howard, M.D. Medical Examiner	<u>7-22-2019</u> Date
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**Implemented:** May 2003      **Revised:** March 2008; Feb 2010, June 2012; Oct 2013; August 2015; December 2017; August 2019

**Computer File Name:** Definition of Deaths Reportable to the Medical Examiner's Office

## **RCW 68.50.010 Coroner's Jurisdiction Over Remains**

The jurisdiction of bodies of all deceased persons who come to their death suddenly when in apparent good health without medical attendance within the thirty-six hours preceding death; or where the circumstances of death indicate death was caused by unnatural or unlawful means; or where death occurs under suspicious circumstances; or where a coroner's autopsy or postmortem or coroner's inquest is to be held; or where death results from unknown or obscure causes, or where death occurs within one year following an accident; or where the death is caused by any violence whatsoever, or where death results from a known or suspected abortion; whether self-induced or otherwise; where death apparently results from drowning, hanging, burns, electrocution, gunshot wounds, stabs or cuts, lightning, starvation, radiation, exposure, alcoholism, narcotics or other addictions, tetanus, strangulations, suffocation or smothering; or where death is due to premature birth or still birth; or where death is due to a violent contagious disease or suspected contagious disease which may be a public health hazard; or where death results from alleged rape, carnal knowledge or sodomy, where death occurs in a jail or prison; where a body is found dead or is not claimed by relatives or friends, is hereby vested in the county coroner, which bodies may be removed and placed in the morgue under such rules as are adopted by the coroner with the approval of the county commissioners, having jurisdiction, providing therein how the bodies shall be brought to and cared for at the morgue and held for the proper identification where necessary.

[ 1963 c 178 § 1; 1953 c 188 § 1; 1917 c 90 § 3; RRS § 6042. Formerly RCW 68.08.010.]

**NOTE:** Although RCW 68.50.010 describes the coroner's jurisdiction over remains, in Spokane County the Medical Examiner holds the same authority for jurisdictional purposes as a coroner.