



Sudden Death
&
The Role of the
Office of the Chief Medical
Examiner (OCME)

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner extends our condolences on the death of your loved one.

Updated August 22, 2016

WHY IS AN INVESTIGATION NECESSARY?

A physician in Alberta may only write a death certificate for deaths that are natural in cause and manner. By law, the OCME must investigate all deaths due to homicidal violence, suicide, accident, unexpectedly when in apparent health, when unattended by a physician, while in the care of the government (e.g. mental health or correctional facilities), as a result of physician-assisted death, and in circumstances considered suspicious.

These deaths are investigated under the authority of the *Fatality Inquiries Act*. Investigations are to determine who died, when they died, how they died, and why they died.

TYPES OF OCME INVESTIGATION

The post-mortem examination: a physical review of the deceased's body by an OCME medical examiner consists of one of these processes:

1. External Examination

The body is assessed for signs of natural disease and trauma, x-rays and toxicology sampling, and a partial internal cavity review may be done.

2. Autopsy Examination

This is an external examination of the body followed by a detailed dissection where the body is inspected for signs of disease and trauma.

If the body of the deceased is to be examined, your loved one will be transported to either our Calgary or Edmonton site office.

Permission from the next of kin is NOT required for our investigations. Should you have a personal, religious, cultural objection, or any

concern regarding a post-mortem examination please tell the investigator assigned to your case as soon as possible. If you wish your loved one to be an organ or tissue donor please also speak with the investigator as soon as possible. The medical examiner assigned to your case will then take your concerns into consideration and weigh them against our goal of maintaining the integrity of the investigation.

Paper-Based Case Review

The OCME screens all death certificates in the province when burial permits and cremations are applied for and when the body is shipped out of province. We may choose to investigate a death in more detail based on the medical records and other documents.

INVESTIGATION RESULTS:

Once the post-mortem examination is complete, one of the investigators will call you to provide you with information:

- They will be able to tell you initial findings, and let you know whether additional laboratory testing has been done which may delay determining the final cause of death.
- If additional laboratory testing has been done, the investigator will also call you with the final cause of death when all the tests are completed and have been reviewed by a medical examiner.

Due to the volume of cases that the OCME medical examiners work on, the current completion time for death investigations can routinely be greater than six months.

RELEASE OF YOUR LOVED ONE:

Typically we are able to release your loved one later in the afternoon on the day of their examination.

We encourage you to contact a funeral home of your choice as soon as possible to facilitate the release of your loved one.

WHAT DO THESE SERVICES COST?

There is no charge for the investigation. Charges apply only for documents that the OCME produces. The OCME pays for the inward journey transportation costs to our office and for the return of your loved one to the funeral home (up to the same mileage as the inward journey).

WILL THERE BE A PUBLIC FATALITY INQUIRY?

Certain cases are reviewed by the Fatality Review Board and they may recommend a public fatality inquiry.

Public fatality inquiries are not required for all deaths. A public fatality inquiry may be held by a Provincial Court Judge to make recommendations to help prevent future similar deaths.

SETTLING OF ESTATES:

Most financial institutions will require official proof-of-death documents before the deceased's claims and other dispositions can be settled.

There are three commonly requested "proof of death" documents.

1. Death Certificate

The OCME does not issue death certificates to the public. They are issued only through Alberta registry agents.

2. Statement of Death

Your funeral director will issue a Statement of Death which is an acceptable proof of death in many instances.

3. Certificate of Medical Examiner

This document is produced by the OCME and is specific to Alberta.

To obtain this document see the next section, "death related documents".

DEATH RELATED DOCUMENTS:

A letter will be mailed to you from the OCME after the death of your loved one.

This letter will give you instructions on how to order death-related documents produced by the OCME and the associated costs.

Documents that the OCME produces will depend on the type of examination or paper-based file review that the medical examiner does.

The OCME may issue a number of different documents depending on the type of investigation undertaken - e.g. certificate of medical examiner, external examination report, summary autopsy report, detailed scientific report and toxicology report. **Not all these documents may be available for your specific case file.**

Next of kin will receive a "Request To Access Information" form to order documents relevant

to your case file. In addition, should you wish to authorize a third party to receive certain document(s) you may complete the "Consent To Disclose Information" form which will be sent to you. Both forms are also available on our website.

According to section 1(k) of the *Fatality Inquiries Act*, "next of kin" means the mother, father, children, brothers, sisters, spouse, and adult interdependent partner of a deceased person.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

If you need any further information, please contact the site office handling your case file:

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner
4070 Bowness Road N.W.
Calgary, Alberta T3B 3R7
Phone: 403-297-8123
Fax: 403-297-3429

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner
7007 116 Street NW
Edmonton, AB T6H 5R8
Phone: 780-427-4987
Fax: 780-422-1265

Hours: 8:15 am - 4:30 pm (open Monday to Friday, closed statutory holidays)
24/7/365 for death notifications and emergencies

Email: OCME_Admin@gov.ab.ca
Website: <https://justice.alberta.ca>