

# Coroner Refresher

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# Topics Covered

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- Laws and Duties
- Procedures
- Investigation and Reports

# Coroner Duties

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- Investigate the circumstances surrounding someone's death
- Determine the immediate cause of death
- Determine the manner of death
- Identify the decedent
- Identify and notify the NOK
- Secure the decedent's property

# Short Form / Long Form

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- These two terms are specific to our agency, not universal terms.
- A Short Form is essentially an info report that documents the response to what turned out to be a non-coroner case.
- A Long Form is an actual coroner investigation (coroner inquiry).

# *To Short Form or not to Short Form...that is the question*

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- Our actions and duties as a coroner are dictated by 27491 of the Government Code.
- The coroner shall have discretion to determine the extent of inquiry to be made into any death occurring under natural circumstances and falling within the provisions of this section, and if inquiry determines that the physician of record has sufficient knowledge to reasonably state the cause of a death occurring under natural circumstances, the coroner may authorize that physician to sign the certificate of death.

# *To Short Form or not to Short Form...that is the question*

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- So in otherwords, if someone dies of natural causes and they have a primary physician who can reasonably state why the decedent died, we can take a Short Form.
- Not any Doctor can sign. Remember we have the responsibility to make sure the Doctor has reasonable knowledge to sign. A primary care physician would automatically meet this criteria.
- If an ER Dr. is willing to sign, questions need to be asked to establish their knowledge of the cause of death.

# Short Form after hours

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- If it is after hours and the physician is not available, but you have enough legitimate information to justify a Short Form then a Short Form can be taken.
  - Primary care physician has been established, no guesses.
  - Facts of medical issues, not speculation.
  - The primary care has seen them last in a reasonable amount of time.

The primary care physician must be able to sign to take a short form.

Get your supervisor approval prior to taking a Short Form without speaking to the physician.

## Included with all Short Forms

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- The name and accurate contact information of the physician
- The name of the clinic the physician practices at
- The time of death
- Document contact with the responding mortuary indicating you provided the above info to them.
- Or if family decides to call a mortuary on their own later. Name of mortuary.

# Long Forms (Coroner Inquiry)

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- 27491 of the Government Code dictates when we must take what we call a Long Form.
- Any deaths related to the following:
  - Violent, sudden, or unusual deaths
  - Unattended deaths
  - Suspected self-induced or criminal abortion
  - Known or suspected homicide
  - Suicide
  - Death related to an accident or injury (old or recent)
  - Drowning
  - Fire

# Long Forms (Coroner Inquiry)

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- Hanging
- Gunshot
- Stabbing
- Cutting
- Exposure
- Starvation
- Acute alcoholism
- Drug addiction (Overdose)
- Strangulation
- Aspiration
- SUIDS
- You get the point, other than natural essentially

# Long Form Investigation

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Should be detailed and comprehensive.  
Follow the template, but add as much  
information as you can under each heading.

The template was created as a prompt to add  
pertinent information and as a way for the  
pathologist to quickly find the information  
they need to help determine cause of death.

# Long Form Investigation

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Should be detailed and comprehensive. Follow the template, but add as much information as you can under each heading.

The template was created as a prompt to add pertinent information, and as a way for the pathologist to quickly find the information they need to help determine cause of death.

Not created to make the report shorter

# Long Form Investigation

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Describe scene in detail. Avoid vague terms like "the house was in disarray"

Describe the body position on your arrival and whether it had been moved prior to your arrival. If it had been moved, who moved it, why they moved it, and what was the position when they first arrived.

Is the lividity consistent with the body position

# Long Form Investigation

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## 27491.2 (b) of the Government Code

- The body of one who is known to be dead from any of the causes or under any of the circumstances described in section 27491 shall not be disturbed or moved from the position or place of death without permission of the coroner or the coroner's appointed deputy (misdemeanor).

# Long Form Investigation

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## 27491.3 (d) of the Government Code

- Gives an exception to peace officers when it comes to moving a body
- A peace officer may search a deceased person at the scene of a traffic accident for identification.
- This is the only exception for any of our local Police Departments or CHP to move a dead body.
- This goes for fire and medics as well. They should not move a dead body under any circumstances.

# Long Form Investigation

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When gathering statements, establish the circumstances of the death (that is one of our duties).

What was the decedent doing prior to the death and during the death? If involved in an accident, where did it occur and what were the circumstances of the accident.

# Next-of-Kin

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Every effort needs to be made to identify and notify the legal next-of-kin as soon as possible.

Document steps taken to identify next-of-kin

If found and notified, document their info, and their specific relationship to the decedent.

# Next-of-Kin 7100 H&S

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1. Legally married spouse (separated but still legally married counts).
2. Adult children (legally adopted counts)
3. Surviving parents
4. Adult sibling (any adult sibling counts, we do not have to search for the eldest).
5. Continue through the respective next degrees of kinship

- All parties must be competent.
  - Example would be if the NOK is considered the spouse, but that spouse has dementia, and there is an adult child that you spoke to, consider that adult child the NOK. Document that fact in report

# Identification of Decedent

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- Document how identification was made
- Tattoos can be a source of identification
  - Documentation of identification by tattoos needs to be detailed and outline the tattoos were unique in appearance, in the same location on the body, and matched the tattoos of whatever source you reference for comparison.
  - Couple the tattoos with other evidence of identification such as indicia on scene matching, vehicle on scene registered to decedent, residence belonging to decedent, etc.

When in doubt consult with supervisor

# Property – 27491.3 GC

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In any death into which the coroner is to inquire, the coroner may take charge of any and all personal effects, valuables, and property of the deceased at the scene of death or related to the inquiry and hold or safeguard them until lawful disposition thereof can be made.

We may lock and seal the premises pending the arrival of NOK

If NOK is on scene, try not to take any property. It is one less thing we have to deal with.

# Property Continued

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- We have no legal obligation to take medication. That being said, situation dictates. Don't leave medication on scene if you believe there is a chance it will be illegal used by people on scene.
- Document meds in body of report. Type of meds and dosage. No need to count the meds or complete a medication inventory.
- If meds are taken, book them for destruction.
- Take decedent photos of medication bottles

# Property Continued

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- If valuables are taken, list each item in report. Do not use terms like “multiple pieces of jewelry.”
- If we take property, we are doing so to keep it safe for the ultimate return to the next-of-kin. It is a huge liability for the Sheriff’s Office to take and keep property in this manner, so documentation of each item taken is important.
- Extenuating circumstances do exist. In the case of a large box full of hundreds of pieces of small jewelry for example, use common sense and list it as such.

# Your Report

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- The single most important piece of documentation regarding a death is the initial report
- A coroner's report is the most requested and scrutinized report in the Sheriff's Office, generally speaking.
  - Requested by family members (every coroner report)
  - Requested by allied agencies (CHP, PD's, Probation departments)
  - Requested by the county Suicide Prevention Task Force
  - Requested by the county Child Death Review Board
  - Requested by physicians
  - Requested by insurance agencies
  - Requested by media outlets
  - Requested by random people not affiliated with the case

# Your Report

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- Every report should be written to convince the reader that the death was not a homicide
  - Complete statements
  - Detailed scene description
  - Detailed body condition and position
  - Clearly laid out circumstances leading up to the death

## Some More Responsibilities

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- Consider yourself a Deputy Coroner when on scene.
- Treat every death as a homicide until you rule it out through your investigation.
- The local PD's are not coroner investigators. Do not rely on them to tell you there are no suspicious circumstances. That is your responsibility as the coroner deputy by law, not there's.

## 27491.1 GC

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In all cases in which a person has died under circumstances that afford a reasonable ground to suspect that the person's death has been occasioned by the act of another by criminal means, the coroner, upon determining that those reasonable grounds exist, shall immediately notify the law enforcement agency having jurisdiction over the criminal investigation.

## 27491.3 GC

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- At the scene of any death, when it is immediately apparent or when it has not been previously recognized and the coroner's examination reveals that police investigation or criminal prosecution may ensue, the coroner shall not further disturb the body or any related evidence until the law enforcement agency has had reasonable opportunity to respond to the scene.
- Custody and control of the body remains with the coroner at all times. We never lose jurisdiction over the body.
- The PD should never place the body in the bag, that is our job. Coroner has final say over where and when the body is removed.

# Process after Report-Short Form

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- The body goes to the mortuary
- The mortuary fax's the cause of death form to the primary physician
- The primary physician provides causes and signs the form
- The mortuary completes the death certificate which includes the causes and physician name
- The mortuary forwards the death certificate to the coroner
- The coroner signs the death certificate

# Process after Report-Long Form

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- Chief Deputy Coroner reviews report
- Chief Deputy Coroner rejects report multiple times (Just Kidding)
- Decide if the body needs to go to Placer County for exam, or if the physician may ultimately sign, or if there are sufficient medical records for a chart review.
- If the body is sent to Placer , there are four different exams that may take place
  - External examination
  - Partial autopsy
  - Full autopsy
  - Rule out autopsy

## Continued

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- We don't know what type of examination will take place. The pathologist will determine based on the info in your report what type of exam they will do.
- External exams are the preferred method as they are less intrusive and less time consuming.
- After the exam the mortuary picks the body up from Placer and brings it back to their facility.
- I complete the death certificate, often times with a pending cause of death until I get the final report back from the pathologist.
- The family can take possession of the body when it comes back from Placer

The End

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Questions / Concerns