

SUDDEN DEATH AND THE ROLE OF THE MEDICAL EXAMINER

WHEN DEATH OCCURS SUDDENLY...

Cannot be explained, or is injury related, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner conducts an investigation. All such deaths in Alberta are investigated under the authority of the Fatality Inquiries Act. The investigation is held to determine the cause and circumstances of the death. In some cases a public inquiry is held and recommendations are made to help prevent similar deaths.

Next of kin may find this pamphlet helpful in explaining the steps which must be taken in carrying out an investigation. Information is also presented for your guidance in settling an estate in the event that the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner has investigated the death.

Answers to some of the questions and concerns you may have:

Why is an investigation necessary?

Alberta law does not permit a doctor to sign a death certificate if the cause of death is not clear or if the doctor has not attended the person within 14 days prior to death from natural causes. The purpose of the investigation is to determine the identity of the person; the date, time and place of death; and circumstances such as the cause and manner of the death.

The cooperation and assistance of next of kin and all others concerned is appreciated.

Will an autopsy be required?

When reasonable doubt about the medical cause of death exists, an autopsy may be authorized by the Medical Examiner. Permission of next of kin is not required.

An autopsy may include complex laboratory tests, so it may be some months before results are known. If an autopsy is required, the body will be transported to the Medical Examiner's office in Edmonton. In cases

where an autopsy is not necessary, an external examination is performed.

What do these services cost?

There is no charge for investigations. The Office of the Medical Examiner pays transportation costs *unless an emergency vehicle* (e.g. ambulance) has been dispatched to attempt life saving, rescue or search. You are encouraged to discuss any concern over a transportation cost with our office especially if you receive a bill for transportation of the deceased that is not within the emergency response category outlined above. There are fees for copies of the Medical Examiners reports.

Will there be a public fatality inquiry?

Certain cases are reviewed by a three-member board which decides if a fatality inquiry should be held. Public fatality inquiries are not required for all deaths. They are held most often in cases of accidental deaths (especially preventable deaths) or deaths in custody.

What happens at a public inquiry?

A provincial court judge presides over the public inquiry. The inquiry will determine the identity of the deceased; the date, time and place of death; and the circumstances, notably the cause and manner of death. The judge may make recommendations for the prevention of similar accidents. Findings of legal responsibility or any other conclusion of the law are not permitted.

Setting of Estates

Institutions such as banks and insurance companies usually require an official **proof of death** before claims and other dispositions may be settled. In cases where the Medical Examiner has investigated a death, neither the family doctor nor the hospital may complete any documents. There are two types of documents which serve as proof of death.

1. Certificate of Death

This document is the official government certificate of death. Most firms accept this document as proof of death. It provides the name of the deceased, date of death, place of death (city, town, village), marital status, regular residence (city, town, village), sex and age. It does not give the cause or manner of death. A certificate of death may be obtained from a local registries office. ***Please note these are not available from the Medical Examiner's Office.**

2. Certificate of Medical Examiner

This document provides the medical cause and manner of death, and a brief description of the circumstances. There is a \$15 fee for this report, subsequent copies are free. Insurance companies often require this information. Rather than completing forms provided by insurance companies or banks, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner provides the *Certificate of Medical Examiner* upon authorization of next of kin.

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner will not provide a *Certificate of Medical Examiner* to any insurance company, financial institution or any person requesting one without written consent from a next of kin.

Autopsy Report

If an autopsy has been authorized by the Medical Examiner's Office, a summary of the autopsy report is available for a fee of \$15. Should you require a copy of the detailed autopsy, which would include toxicological analysis, if done, there is a fee of \$40. An insurance company holding a policy on the deceased is entitled to this report without next of kin authorization.

External Examination Report

If an autopsy was not done then an External Examination report will be available. The fee for this report is \$15. An insurance company holding a policy

on the deceased is entitled to this report without next of kin authorization.

Toxicology Analysis

If toxicological analysis was done, the report is available for a fee of \$20. However, please note that it is included with the complete Autopsy Report. An insurance company holding a policy on the deceased is entitled to this report without next of kin authorization.

Obtaining Medical Examiner Reports

All requests for Medical Examiner's reports must be in writing and accompanied by the appropriate fee. A cheque or money order may be made payable to the "Minister of Finance."

Information will be provided only to the direct next of kin (spouse, parent, sibling, adult child), executor of estate or to those authorized in writing by any of the above mentioned unless otherwise stated in this brochure.

Further Information and Assistance

Personnel in the Office of Alberta's Chief Medical Examiner will be pleased to assist you with any further questions or concerns.

Calgary

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The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner may be reached toll free through the Alberta Government RITE telephone system during weekday office hours at 310-0000.