Responsibilities of the Weld County Coroner/Medical Examiner’s Office

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The Weld County Coroner/ Medical Examiner’s Office

- Consists of:
  - The Medical Examiner
  - Coroner
  - Chief Deputy Coroner
  - 4 full-time Investigators
  - 2 additional contract Forensic Pathologist Medical Examiners
  - 1 Office Technician
- Our Office is a separate, independent investigative agency.
- We have a different focus from police (cause & manner of death vs. criminality).
- We have similar goals: finding the truth, determining if a crime was committed.
- Our Medicolegal Death Investigators (MDI) are or will soon be ABMDI certified and all MDI’s are trained in autopsy procedure.
- Our MDI’s have similar training as other L.E. agencies and work well with them.
- Many different people and agencies are vitally concerned with our findings, including the decedent’s family, law enforcement, defense & prosecuting attorneys, OSHA, hospitals, Vital Statistics, Health Dept, insurance companies, the general public.
Coroner’s Statutory Responsibilities
CRS 30-10-606

- Investigate any sudden, unexpected death:
  - All suspected homicides
  - All suspected suicides
  - All suspected accidents
  - Any death occurring “in custody”
  - Skeletal remains
  - Any child death
  - Any person who dies within 24 hours of hospital or nursing home admission
- We respond to the death scene, 24/7;
- Interview witnesses, family, physicians, etc.;
- Take all steps necessary to positively identify the decedent;
- Notify next of kin, as soon as a positive identification is made. This is done day or night;
- Determine date & time of death;
- Collect, preserve, & process evidence from the scene that may be pertinent to the death;
- Photograph and/ or sketch the scene;
- Remove the body from the scene & transport to the morgue.
We compile information gathered during investigation & document our findings in complete, unbiased reports.

Assist at autopsy.

Work with other agencies to achieve the most complete, accurate investigation possible.

Help detect crime and prevent further crime.

Help prevent further injury or illness for the citizens of Weld County.

Provide complete, honest information to family.

Release information to the public through press releases & media interviews.

Provide testimony at depositions and in court.

Provide training & education to other law enforcement, health professionals, community service agencies, school programs, & general public as required;

Compile relevant statistics in an Annual Report, which is available to the public in hard copy and on the Weld County website (www.co.weld.co.us).
Weld County’s Forensic Pathologists Medical Examiners

- Fourteen years of higher education, including college, medical school, and specialization in Clinical, Anatomical, and then Forensic Pathology
- Numbers in the US are declining due to stringent educational requirements.
- Out of the 14 -15 Forensic Pathologists in Colorado, Weld County has two full time and one contract/ part time FPs.
James A. Wilkerson IV, MD

- Board-Certified in Anatomic, Clinical Forensic Pathology
- B.S. degree in Chemistry from Birmingham Southern College, M.D. degree from the Univ. of AL. Internship DDEAMC Augusta GA and residency Brooke AMC San Antonio. Fellowship in Forensic Pathology at AFIP (Armed Forces Institute of Pathology) Washington, DC
- Has been practicing since 1991. Dr. Wilkerson is an active member of multiple regional and national pathology organizations. He has been chief of medical staff at Mercy Medical Center in Merced CA.
- His areas of interest include all areas of pathology, and particularly forensic.
The Weld County Coroner, and the Medical Examiner are legally responsible to:

- Certify Cause and Manner of Death (issue Death Certificates) for all the cases they autopsy, and some Coroner’s cases that are not autopsied.

- A certification without autopsy is done by a review of medical history, medical records, and a scene investigation which reveals nothing to indicate anything OTHER than a natural death.
The on-call Forensic Pathologists (FP) in Weld County not only does all of Weld autopsies, but also covers northeastern Colorado and the entire state of Wyoming. There is not any additional cost to Weld County for the FP’s coverage of other counties.

The FP will perform anywhere from 1 to 5 or more autopsies per day, averaging 500 – 550 per year. Autopsies are done 7 days a week.

After the autopsy, all findings must be dictated for transcription. The FP examines the microscopic slides of organ tissue from the case, monitors and interprets all toxicology tests, and finally, issues a legal opinion as to Cause and Manner of death.

The FP is often called to meet with police and attorneys and to testify in court as an expert witness, at no additional charge to the County.
Autopsy

- All MDI’s assist “hands-on” at the autopsy of each of their cases.
- There is no better way to convey accurate, timely, and complete information to the Pathologist.
- It allows the Pathologist to gain immediate background and scene information to supplement autopsy findings.
- It also allows the MDI to gain immediate knowledge of autopsy findings to supplement their investigation.
- The immediate sharing of information over the autopsy table can solidify or change the course of the investigation.
- Finally, this “dual function” of the MDI’s saves the County budgetary dollars, as no separate autopsy personnel are needed.
The **cause** of death (the medical reason the body shut down) is determined by autopsy. The **manner** of death, however, cannot be accurately determined without the thorough investigation of the MDIs. Families, L.E. agencies, insurance companies, and others are often most concerned with the manner ruling. The five manners of death are listed below.

- **NATURAL**
- **ACCIDENT**
- **SUICIDE**
- **HOMICIDE**
- **UNDETERMINED**
Education for MDI’s

- Colorado P.O.S.T Certification preferred
- Certification by CCA & ABMDI preferred
- College Degree, preferred
- Medical Training
  (examples: A&P, EMT, Pre-Med, Nursing)
- Forensic Training/ Seminars
- Death Investigation Seminars
Those MDI’s who maintain their Colorado POST status participate in ongoing training in driving, firearms, interview techniques, and any other requirements set forth by the Sheriff.

They also must have continuing education credits for state and national certification in such subjects as medical, evidence collection, crime scene investigation, accident investigation, etc.
The MDI’s Responsibilities

- Each MDI is on “Primary” call for 24 hours, then works the next 24 hours on “Back-up” call.
- This cycle rotates 365 days a year between the investigators.
- When there is a death anywhere, anytime in Weld County, the MDI is paged.
He/she is notified by police officer or Hospice nurse on scene and must decide if the death appears to be natural and can be released, or if a scene investigation is required (as in all suicides, homicides, accidents, or unknown deaths with questionable circumstances).

If all appears natural and consistent with medical history, investigative questions are asked by phone and the death is fully documented. The funeral home then receives the body.
If there are any unusual circumstances or “red flags”, the MDI will immediately respond to the scene.

By statute, no object “on or immediately surrounding the body” can be moved until the Coroner arrives or approves the removal.

Due to this, the response time can be critical. He/she must “drop everything and go,” regardless of what they were doing when paged.
- An average scene takes about 2-5 hours to process but can take up to 16 hrs or more.

- If two deaths happen simultaneously within the County, the backup MDI is called. If more than 2 deaths occur at one time, an investigator may be called in on their “off” day.

- When processing the scene, the MDI must thoroughly examine the body, take photographs, collect any evidence that might be pertinent to the death and conduct necessary interviews.

- After they are done at the scene, they take the body to the morgue to log in and do preliminary processing, such as weighing the body, fingerprinting, logging clothing and personal effects, setting up the morgue, and preparing a file & paperwork for the autopsy.

- The MDI must then be back at the morgue to assist with the scheduled autopsy, usually the next morning.
We respond to all kinds of scenes, including
Evidence our office routinely collects & processes

- The Body
- Evidence of abuses (drugs, alcohol, tobacco)
- Blood and other DNA & trace evidence (from scene & body)
- Clothing
- Personal Effects
- Next of Kin information
- Medical/ psychological records and information
We also collect

- Weapons & other mechanisms of death (ligatures, alcohol, Rx medications, illicit drugs, poisons, etc)
Investigators will count each and every pill to accurately log amounts prescribed, # of pills missing, & document doctors and pharmacies used.
After autopsy, the MDI is responsible to clean and re-stock the morgue.

Then, he/she will do follow-up work such as phone calls to the family, logging evidence, sending press releases, sharing autopsy results with family and law enforcement, etc.

After all necessary interviews have been conducted, medical & other records gathered, and all other necessary investigative steps have been taken, the MDI will compile and type an Investigative Report.
The Investigative Report is **NOT** Public Record under the Public Open Records Act because it may contain HIPPA Protection or hear-say information and/or information that may be damaging to families or others (CRS: 24-72-204). It is a confidential document used to convey all investigative information gathered to the Pathologist and will aid in determining the manner of death.

Death Certificates are also confidential and exempt from the public’s right to inspect unless the person or agency can show “direct and tangible interest” (CRS: 25-2-117).

Autopsy reports with final ruling of Cause and Manner, as well as toxicology results, are Public Record.

The case is closed only when the final Autopsy Report, Investigative Report, and final Death Certificate with Cause and Manner of Death are completed, usually within 30 to 45 days.
What we “specialize” in….

- Forensic Photography
- Blood Spatter
- Pattern Injuries
- Ballistics/ Gunshot wounds
- Grief Counseling
- Anatomy & Physiology & Medical
- Toxicology
- Motor Vehicle Accident Reconstruction
- Forensic Report Writing
- Evidence Collection
- Forensic Anthropology
- Forensic Entomology
- Interviewing Techniques/ Body Language
- Our investigators have expertise in some of these fields and use of this expertise saves the County from the expense of calling in outside resources.

“Struck from behind, all right … and from my first examination of the wound, I’d say this was done by some kind of heavy, blunt object.”
Caseload

- Weld County handles approx. 900 - 1000 deaths per year.
- They respond to the scene and conduct full investigations on approximately 40% of the deaths documented by the office.
- Approximately 16% (135-155) of the reported deaths require a full forensic autopsy.
As the population goes up, so do our cases.

On the rise in Weld County (and across the nation) are toxicology cases, primarily Rx drug overdoses.

Increased toxicology testing has caused the largest jump in our budget.

Thanks to TV, “unusual” substances such as poisons, especially used in suicides, are also on the rise. These are sometimes difficult to detect and require special (and costly) testing procedures.

In spite of these challenges, we work hard to stay conservative and work within our budget while still giving the public the most accurate answers possible in each and every case.
Weld County Commissioners

Our Forensic Pathologist worked hard to make and keep the Weld County Coroner’s office professional, scientifically progressive, and well-educated.

The Weld County Commissioners have had a huge role in this effort. They have consistently seen the “larger picture.” Due to the WCCO, our office has been equipped with solid, up-to-date equipment, a safe and modern working environment, adequate staffing, the budget necessary to do a professional job, and support from other County departments. While many jurisdictions try to ignore death and put their Coroner’s offices in a back corner, WCCO has recognized the need for a competent and professional Coroner - Medical Examiner system.

Thank You!
Questions?

OFFICE OF THE
CORONER

WELD COUNTY

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Revised 02/02/2012