

# **OSAC 2022-N-0026 Medicolegal Death Investigation: Terms and Definitions**

*Medicolegal Death Investigation  
Medicine Scientific Area Committee  
Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) for Forensic Science*



## **Draft OSAC Proposed Standard**

# **OSAC 2022-N-0026 Medicolegal Death Investigation: Terms and Definitions**

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1                                   **Medicolegal Death Investigation:**  
2                                   **Terms and Definitions**

3   **Foreword**

4   The Medicolegal Death Investigation Subcommittee of the Organization of Scientific Area  
5   Committees determined that there was variation in the terms and definitions relevant to  
6   medicolegal death investigation. This document standardizes the terms and definitions to  
7   promote consistency across disciplines and jurisdictions.  
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16   **Keywords:** *medicolegal death investigation, coroner, medical examiner*

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19   **Abstract:** This technical document provides the standardization of terms and definitions used in  
20   standards development in the medicolegal death investigation community. The use of  
21   standardized terminology in the medicolegal death investigation community promotes  
22   consistency across jurisdictions and relieves the judicial system of conflicting terms and  
23   definitions.

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28                    **Medicolegal Death Investigation: Terms and Definitions**

29    **1. Scope**

30    This technical document provides the standardization of terms and definitions used in standards  
31    development in the medicolegal death investigation community. The use of standardized  
32    terminology in the medicolegal death investigation community promotes consistency across  
33    jurisdictions and relieves the judicial system of conflicting terms and definitions. The list of  
34    terms included in this document are fundamental to medicolegal death investigation and  
35    associated standards, it is not meant to be exhaustive. Some terms as defined in this document  
36    may be used with different meanings in other disciplines.

37  
38    **2. Normative References**

39    The references used for these terms and definitions can be found in the OSAC Lexicon.  
40    <https://www.nist.gov/osac/osac-lexicon>

41  
42    **3. Terms and Definitions**

43        **3.1**

44        **accreditation**

45        Formal recognition by an independent accreditation body that a medicolegal system, office,  
46        or agency meets or exceeds a prescribed set of standards

47  
48        **3.2**

49        **accident (manner)**

50        Unexpected or unforeseen death due to injury

51  
52        **3.3**

53        **autopsy**

54        Diagnostic medical procedure consisting of postmortem external examination, internal  
55        examination, and other ancillary tests of a decedent; conducted by a pathologist

56  
57        **3.4**

58        **biospecimen**

59        Any biological specimen derived from a decedent

60  
61        **3.6**

62        **cause of death**

63        Medical opinion of the disease or injury that resulted in a person's death

64  
65        **3.7**

66 **certification**

67 Procedure by which a third party gives written assurance that a person, product, process, or  
68 service conforms to specific requirements (ISO/IEC Guide 2:2016)

69

70 **3.8**

71 **chief medicolegal officer**

72 Medical examiner, coroner, justice of the peace or other official who oversees the operation  
73 of a medicolegal death investigation office and/or system.

74

75 **3.9**

76 **certified medicolegal death investigator**

77 Medicolegal death investigator who has completed the requirements for Certification  
78 (Registry or Board) by an accredited credentialing body, currently American Board of  
79 Medicolegal Death Investigators

80

81 **3.10**

82 **coroner**

83 Elected or appointed official whose duty is to oversee medicolegal death investigations,  
84 usually for a single county, and ensure certification of cause and manner of death; duties vary  
85 based on local enabling statutes

86

87 **3.11**

88 **could not be determined (manner)**

89 (see **3.37 undetermined**)

90

91 **3.12**

92 **death certificate**

93 Formal vital statistics document certifying the identification, cause and manner of death of a  
94 particular individual

95

96 **3.13**

97 **death scene**

98 Location or site at which a death is pronounced, and at which the decedent's body is  
99 located. This may or may not be the same location as the incident scene

100

101 **3.14**

102 **decedent**

103 Deceased person or any suspected human remains

104

- 105        **3.15**  
106        **external examination**  
107        Diagnostic medical procedure consisting of physical inspection and ancillary tests of the  
108        decedent without internal examination, conducted by a pathologist  
109
- 110        **3.16**  
111        **external evaluation**  
112        Physical assessment of the decedent by a medicolegal death investigator  
113
- 114        **3.17**  
115        **forensic autopsy**  
116        Autopsy authorized by law, and typically performed under the jurisdiction of a medical  
117        examiner or coroner for criminal justice and public health purposes  
118
- 119        **3.18**  
120        **forensic pathologist**  
121        Physician who is board-certified in forensic pathology by an accredited credentialing body,  
122        currently American Board of Pathology and American Osteopathic Board of Pathology  
123
- 124        **3.19**  
125        **forensic pathology**  
126        Practice of medicine in which the principles of pathology are applied to problems of potential  
127        legal, public health, or public safety significance; a common function is the performance of  
128        autopsies to determine the cause and manner of death  
129
- 130        **3.20**  
131        **homicide (manner)**  
132        Death as a result of a volitional act committed by another person (e.g. injury, poisoning). The  
133        classification of homicide does not necessarily indicate that a crime was committed  
134
- 135        **3.21**  
136        **hospital autopsy**  
137        Autopsy requested by a medical caretaker or healthcare facility, usually authorized by the  
138        next-of-kin  
139
- 140        **3.22**  
141        **incident scene**  
142        Location at which a fatal injury or fatal sequence of events happened. This may or may not  
143        be the same location as where the death was pronounced

144

145 **3.23**

146 **jurisdiction**

147 (1) Legal authority to make legal decisions and judgments regarding a death, including  
148 performance of autopsy, as well as investigation and certification of cause and manner of  
149 death.

150 (2) Geographic area in which a medical examiner or coroner's authority applies

151

152 **3.24**

153 **manner of death**

154 Classification system based on the circumstances under which death occurred; includes  
155 accident, homicide, natural, suicide, and undetermined

156

157 **3.25**

158 **medical examiner**

159 Appointed forensic pathologist whose duty is to oversee medicolegal death investigations,  
160 perform postmortem examinations, and certify cause and manner of death. In some  
161 jurisdictions, individuals with other qualifications hold the title "Medical Examiner", but for  
162 purposes of this document those individuals are considered medicolegal death investigators

163

164 **3.26**

165 **medicolegal death investigation**

166 Formal inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of a human being; investigative  
167 information is considered with autopsy findings and adjunctive studies (if performed) to  
168 determine the cause and manner of death

169

170 **3.27**

171 **medicolegal death investigation authority**

172 Person or persons whose duty it is to perform medicolegal death investigations for a  
173 designated jurisdiction, and ensure certification of cause and manner of death; duties vary  
174 based on local enabling statutes

175

176 **3.28**

177 **medicolegal death investigation office**

178 Physical location of an agency (usually a medical examiner or coroner office) with the  
179 authority to perform medicolegal death investigations

180

181 **3.29**

182 **medicolegal death investigation system**



- 183 Varied jurisdictional structures used for medicolegal death investigations  
184  
185 **3.30**  
186 **medicolegal death investigator**  
187 Individual who has completed the requirements for Certification (Registry or Board) by an  
188 accredited credentialing body or performs medicolegal death investigations  
189  
190 **3.31**  
191 **natural (manner)**  
192 Death due solely to natural disease  
193  
194 **3.32**  
195 **next of kin**  
196 Legally determined hierarchy of interested parties who have authority over the decedent  
197  
198 **3.33**  
199 **postmortem examination**  
200 Medical examination of a decedent; this may include autopsy, external examination,  
201 evaluation of circumstances, review of medical records and other contextual information  
202  
203 **3.34**  
204 **private autopsy**  
205 Autopsy requested and authorized by next-of-kin  
206  
207 **3.35**  
208 **registry certified medicolegal death investigator**  
209 Medicolegal death investigator who has completed the requirements for Registry certification  
210 by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators or equivalent  
211  
212 **3.36**  
213 **suicide (manner)**  
214 Death resulting from intentional/volitional self-inflicted act  
215  
216 **3.37**  
217 **undetermined (manner)**  
218 Manner of death used when the information pointing to one manner of death is no more  
219 compelling than another  
220