

FACT SHEET – MEDICAL EXAMINER PROCEDURES

To Family or Friends:

First let me express my sincere condolences for your loss. This Fact Sheet is designed to answer many of the questions you will have in the coming days.

LEGAL JURISDICTION: under California law the Medical Examiner is both required and empowered to determine the cause and circumstances of certain deaths. While we make a sincere effort to accommodate any preferences of the decedent or the family, we may be unable to do so because a Medical Examiner's inquiry, by its nature, is a law enforcement function.

PROCESS:

1. **Transportation.** If required, we will arrange for transportation of the decedent's body to our facility at 9320 Farnham Street, San Diego, California.

2. **Examination.** An examination by a forensic pathologist will be conducted to determine the actual cause of death and a death certificate will be completed. This examination normally occurs within three days of our receipt of the decedent's body. Our forensic pathologist staff will assess whether an autopsy and/or laboratory tests are required as part of the examination. Autopsies are required in approximately 75% of our cases. If we do not require an autopsy for our official purposes, the legal next-of-kin may request us to perform an autopsy at his/her expense if desired.

3. **Release of Remains.** The decedent's body will be available for release soon after completion of our examination. Upon our receipt of a signed authorization from the legal next-of-kin, we will release the decedent's body to the mortuary or other service (e.g., cremation society, transportation service) designated in the authorization. The release authorization must be executed by the legal next-of-kin authorized by law to direct disposition of the remains; this person sometimes differs from persons or legal entities authorized to handle other aspects of the decedent's affairs. The mortuary normally provides the authorization form, obtains the signed authorization from the legal next-of-kin and then submits it to us. The mortuary also will request certain vital statistics information from the next-of-kin that must be recorded on the death certificate. (Note: We do not recommend any particular mortuary or other service although, upon request, we can provide you with a list for your consideration.)

4. **Pending Cases.** In approximately 30% of our cases we are unable to record a definitive cause of death on the death certificate immediately following our examination. After the examination is completed, frequently it is necessary for us to perform microscopic, chemical or toxicology tests in order to arrive at the exact cause of death. Depending on the specific analyses required, we often are able to determine the cause of death in less than 90 days. While we make every effort to complete our investigations within 90 days of our examination, occasionally more time is required to complete complicated tests and follow-on analyses. Under the foregoing circumstances we prepare a portion of an initial death certificate after our examination that indicates the cause of death is "Pending". Your mortuary then completes this death certificate and files it with the Vital Records & Statistics Office of the County's Health and Human Services Agency. When we complete our investigation and analyses we then file with the Vital Records Office an amendment to the death certificate that records the actual cause of death in lieu of "Pending". If you requested certified copies of the death certificate from your mortuary, it will secure them for you as discussed below under the heading "Copies of Documents". As a "Pending" death

certificate generally will not be accepted by insurance companies for the payment of life insurance or other benefits, we recommend that you instruct your mortuary to wait until we have filed our amendment to the death certificate before ordering and paying for the death certificate copies you desire. Upon request we also can provide you a Certification of Death letter that some institutions will accept as proof of the death.

PERSONAL PROPERTY: At the scene of death we take custody of certain personal property belonging to the decedent. We may release this personal property at the scene to the legal next-of-kin. If not, the property is removed to our Office where the next-of-kin may retrieve it between 8:00a.m. and 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. If authorized by the next-of-kin, we will release the property to the mortuary for its further delivery to the family.

COPIES OF DOCUMENTS:

1. **Death Certificates.** You may request certified copies of the death certificate from your mortuary which will obtain them when they are ready from the Vital Records & Statistics Office of the County's Health and Human Services Agency. The telephone number for the Vital Records Office is (619) 692-5733, should you wish to order copies directly.

2. **Medical Examiner Reports.** Copies of our autopsy, investigative, and laboratory reports will be available a few weeks after we determine the cause of death and file the death certificate. If you desire these reports, please telephone or write to this Office with your request. There is no charge for the first copy provided to the legal next-of-kin.

FEES: California law authorizes the County's Board of Supervisors to establish fees for certain Medical Examiner services. The fees quoted below were approved by the Board of Supervisors on May 13, 2003, to recover on the costs of the services with no markup.

1. **Mandatory Services.** For the cost of transporting the decedent from the place of death of our facility, a transportation fee of \$153 is charged to the person who directs disposition of the remains together with the body pouch fee of \$20. These combined charges of \$173 are waived if the decedent was under age 14 and in some, but not all cases, when the death is ascribed to the criminal act of another.

2. **Optional Services.** If desired by the next-of-kin, embalming of decedents who were 14 years and older may be performed at our facility for a fee of \$236 or one may elect to have embalming performed by the mortuary. The fee for an autopsy performed solely at the request of the next-of-kin and not required for our official purposes, is \$2,184. Copies of reports are provided at the rate of \$0.10 per page.

Please call our Office at (858) 694-2895 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

GLENN N. WAGNER, D.O.
Chief Medical Examiner