



**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & MENTAL HYGIENE
OFFICE OF CHIEF MEDICAL EXAMINER
520 First Avenue New York, NY 10016
Charles S. Hirsch M.D., Chief Medical Examiner**

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General Information Booklet

AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Chief Medical Examiner has the responsibility to investigate all deaths of persons in the City of New York occurring from criminal violence, by accident, by suicide, suddenly when in apparent health, or in any unusual or suspicious manner. In 1949, the Chief Medical Examiner assumed from the Police Department the obligation to investigate deaths of persons whose bodies are to be cremated. The Chief Medical Examiner is also responsible for taking possession of suicide notes and writings and portable objects useful in establishing the cause of death; maintaining records on all deaths investigated; and delivering to the appropriate District Attorney copies of records relating to every death in which there is an indication of criminality. (NYC Charter §557; NYC Administrative Code §17-202)

OCME employs approximately 32 Medical Examiners who perform an average of 5500 autopsies each year.

Investigation of a Reportable Death

Police precincts and hospitals throughout the City telephone a Report of Death to OCME's Communications Unit; the clerk on duty records basic information concerning the circumstances of injury or death, and of hospitalization. The clerk then notifies an OCME MedicoLegal Investigator (MLI) assigned to the borough in which the death is reported.

The MLI's responsibility is to inquire further into the circumstances and to determine whether the death falls within OCME jurisdiction. If the death is attributable to natural causes, the MLI may designate the physician who recently treated the decedent as the person to issue a Death Certificate.

If the death falls within OCME jurisdiction, the MLI will respond to the scene and obtain additional facts from family, friends, and police. If there are reasons for further examination or autopsy, the MLI will direct that the body be transported to an OCME facility. When death has occurred in a hospital, a field investigation is generally not conducted; instead, the investigation routinely consists of a review of hospital records with the reporting physician.

Identification

Each body received by OCME must be identified. A body which has not been personally identified will be fingerprinted and photographed by detectives assigned to OCME's unit of the Police Department's Missing Persons Squad. Fingerprints are sent to State and federal law enforcement agencies for comparison with their records.

If a decedent's fingerprints cannot be taken due to the condition of the body, or if no matching fingerprint record can be located, an OCME Forensic Odontologist (Dentist) will compare dental X-rays taken by OCME with records and X-rays from the decedent's personal dentist. Where there are no dental records available for the decedent, X-rays of the body may be compared by an OCME radiologist with X-rays taken during hospitalization or other circumstances.

When a complete or partial skeleton is recovered, a Forensic Anthropologist will be consulted to determine whether the remains are human; if so, further analysis may help determine the age, race, sex and other characteristics of the skeletal remains. All of this information will be utilized to attempt to identify the decedent.

If suitable comparison samples are available (such as personal effects containing the decedent's DNA, or first degree relatives), DNA testing can be used for identification purposes.

Autopsy

The Senior Medical Examiner in each of the five borough offices will, on a daily basis, review the cases referred by the MLIs for further examination and, in accordance with applicable law, determine whether an autopsy will be performed. An autopsy can take from one to several hours, depending on the nature of the case.

After completing the autopsy, the Medical Examiner issues a death certificate indicating the cause and manner of death. Frequently, such determinations are dependent on a review of hospital records, police reports, fire marshal reports (in fire deaths) and, in approximately 45% of the cases, subsequent laboratory tests. In such cases, the death certificate will indicate the cause and manner of death as "pending further study." Upon receipt of these test results or other necessary information, final determinations as to cause and manner of death will be made, and the Medical Examiner will issue an amended death certificate reflecting these determinations.

Death certificates are filed with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Bureau of Health Statistics and Analysis. To obtain a death certificate, contact the Bureau at 125 Worth Street, New York, New York 10013, phone 212.788.4520.

Mortuary Services

The Office of Chief Medical Examiner takes custody of all remains which fall under our legal mandate, including all unclaimed or unidentified remains throughout the five

boroughs of the City of New York. We ensure that all remains are handled with dignity and respect; unidentified and unclaimed remains are interred in City Cemetery within a reasonable period of time. If remains are subsequently identified, or if a family wishes to claim a loved one, remains can be disinterred for private burial.

Department of Forensic Biology

Evolving out of the serology laboratory, where testing was limited to blood typing and determining the presence of bodily fluids, the OCME Department of Forensic Biology is able to perform DNA testing in criminal cases and has been doing so since 1991. Homicide, sexual assault and other crime evidence, generally collected by the Police Department, is examined and subjected to DNA extraction and typing. The results are compared to DNA profiles of known suspects and to convicted offender DNA information maintained in the FBI CODIS (Combined DNA Index System) database. DNA results can incriminate or exclude a suspect, or solve cases by finding a match to a repeat offender through the DNA database.

The Department of Forensic Biology provides other services as well. The Forensic Assessment and Reconstruction Unit performs crime scene reconstruction upon request by NYPD or the DA's office. The Forensic Biology Missing Persons Group performs DNA testing and kinship analysis in identification cases, as well as DNA typing of unidentified remains, personal references and family comparison samples for the FBI Missing Persons Database; this database permits comparison of reference data across jurisdictions and thus provides closure to many families with missing relatives. Additionally, the Molecular Genetics team, by performing molecular testing of relevant genetic markers, supports the Medical Examiners in determining cause of death.

Special Operations

The Office of Chief Medical Examiner is an active participant in New York City's Disaster Response system, planning for and responding to disasters of all types. We maintain a team of specially trained experts to respond to any and all fatality events, no matter what hazards may be encountered during recovery. We work with the 311 System, NYPD and NYC's Office of Emergency Management to provide rapid assistance to family members, take reports of missing persons, investigate incidents, gather information for identifications, and disseminate information to other agencies.

HISTORY OF THE OFFICE OF CHIEF MEDICAL EXAMINER

The Office of Chief Medical Examiner of the City of New York ("OCME") was established in 1918 pursuant to a 1915 Act of the New York State Legislature. In addition to being the first governmental agency of its type in the United States, OCME established the first toxicology laboratory in 1918 and the first serology laboratory in 1938, both at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan.

In 1933, New York University established the first Department of Forensic Medicine in the country. Since that date, Medical Examiners at OCME have held faculty positions in NYU's Forensic Medicine department.

OCME's administrative offices were in the Municipal Building from 1918 to 1934, and at 125 Worth Street from 1934 to 1960; autopsies were performed at Bellevue Hospital and other borough municipal hospitals during those years. In 1960, OCME's six-story headquarters at 520 First Avenue (northeast corner of First Avenue and 30th Street) opened on land provided by New York University, adjacent to NYU Medical Center.

In 1968 the Institute of Forensic Medicine of New York University and the City of New York was created; in 1977 the Institute was named after the late Milton Helpert, Chief Medical Examiner from 1954 to 1973. The Institute is comprised of OCME, the New York University School of Medicine, and the New York University College of Dentistry.

OCME's headquarters at 520 First Avenue houses executive offices, the mortuary, autopsy rooms, X-Ray/photography facilities, as well as toxicology and histology laboratories.

In February 2007, OCME opened the OCME DNA Building located at 421 East 26 Street (east of First Avenue), which houses state of the art Forensic Biology laboratories, as well as OCME's Administrative unit and Evidence facilities including a forensic garage to examine vehicles for forensic evidence.

OCME CONTACT INFORMATION

OCME Main Office

520 First Avenue
New York, New York 10016
212.447.2030 (OCME Main Number)

OCME DNA Building

421 East 26th Street
New York, New York 10016

Borough Offices

Manhattan (New York County)

OCME
520 First Avenue
New York, New York 10016
212.447.2713

Bronx

Jacobi Medical Center
1400 Pelham Parkway South
Bronx, New York 10461
718.829.2030

Brooklyn (Kings County)

Kings County Hospital Center
599 Winthrop Street
Brooklyn, New York 11203
718.221.0600

Queens

Queens General Hospital
160-15 82nd Drive
Jamaica, New York 11432
718.557.8700

Staten Island (Richmond County)

Seaview Hospital Center and Home
460 Brielle Avenue
Staten Island, New York 10314
718.668.0620