

About the Office of the Chief Coroner 2004

Who are coroners?

In Ontario, coroners are medical doctors with specialized training in the principles of death investigation. Coroners investigate deaths that are sudden and unexpected, as well as some expected deaths warranting further investigation.

Who may call a coroner?

Anyone who knows of a death qualifying as a coroner's case must call the coroner. In practice, this most often means medical or nursing personnel involved in a person's care, or police at the scene of an unnatural death. However, any person may call if concerned or uncertain about the circumstances surrounding a death. It is the lawful duty of any person to notify a coroner or police if they are aware of deaths in the circumstances listed in *Coroner's Act, s. 10, R.S.O. 1990*. Typically, this happens soon after the death, but there is no time limit to report a coroner's case.

Who does an autopsy?

An autopsy is performed by a pathologist, a physician who is specially trained in the examination of body tissues by visual examination under a microscope. In Ontario, pathologists who work in local hospitals may conduct coroner's autopsies. In very complex cases, a specially trained pathologist at a forensic pathology centre may conduct the autopsy.

Who receives the results of the autopsy?

The pathologist will offer an opinion of the cause of death and submit a report to the coroner. The coroner will consider that report and other investigative findings in determining the cause and manner of death. It may be several months before all of the information the coroner requires is available. The more complex the circumstances, the more time required.

Who is entitled to the information?

At the end of the investigation, any near relative or personal representative may obtain a copy of the coroner's findings and if an autopsy was done, the pathologist's and toxicologist's reports. The request should be in writing, with the requester stating relationship to the deceased. The requester may ask that reports be sent directly to a third party, such as a family doctor or a legal or insurance representative.

When is an inquest called?

The coroner may call an inquest to assist in answering the five questions about a person's death (who, where, how, when and by what means), to focus public attention on preventable deaths or to stimulate response by public or private organizations. An inquest may also be called to correct misinformation about circumstances of any death and to ensure the public that no death will be overlooked, concealed or ignored.

In Ontario, the *Coroner's Act* requires an inquest when deaths result from an accident, on

a construction project, mining plant or mine, including a pit or quarry, or while detained by or in the actual custody of a peace officer, or while an inmate on the premises of a correctional institution or lock-up.

The family of a deceased person may request an inquest. The request should be made to the investigating coroner. The decision to hold an inquest is made in consultation with the supervising coroners and the Office of the Chief Coroner. This ensures that the Office of the Chief Coroner's resources are responsibly used to serve the public needs of Ontario citizens.

How is an inquest conducted?

A coroner who has taken special training presides over the inquest, which is open to the public and news media and is usually held in a courtroom or court-like facilities. For the purposes of the inquest, the coroner can administer oaths and subpoenas to acquire evidence and to call witnesses who have information that would assist the jury in its duty. The purpose of an inquest is not to place blame or legal responsibility. Criminal proceedings arising out of a death must be resolved before any inquest can be held. No one is on trial at an inquest. The presiding coroner and the crown attorney assisting the coroner must protect the goals of the inquest-to bring out the facts relating to the circumstances of the death in a fair and balanced way and allow the jury to make useful and practical recommendations that may prevent similar deaths.

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