

Information for families

The death of a loved one can cause tremendous stress and sorrow. We hope this brochure will assist you during the grieving process and help answer questions about the autopsy process and the role of the Medical Examiner.

The role of the Medical Examiner

The Medical Examiner provides death investigative services and forensic autopsy services for deaths that occur in Carlton, Koochiching and Lake County jurisdictions. All deaths that are sudden or unexpected or occur from other than natural causes must be reported to the Medical Examiner.

Our goal is to assist families, law enforcement agencies and the legal system by determining a scientifically unbiased and logical cause and manner of death. The information gathered during a forensic death investigation and subsequent autopsy can be critical in civil or criminal court cases. Even in straightforward natural deaths, information from the death investigation or autopsy may help surviving family members protect their own health. This brochure will provide answers to guide you when a loved one dies.

Staff and responsibilities

The Medical Examiner is a licensed physician trained in the specialty of forensic pathology. The Medical Examiner is an independent entity and does not work for the County Attorney or any law enforcement agency.

Medical Examiner Investigators are highly trained, experienced individuals who perform death investigations by gathering and interpreting information to ensure that death investigations are unbiased, thorough and accurate. Investigators may ask you many questions that will help to find answers about how and why your loved one died.

If an autopsy is going to be performed, they will contact a representative of the deceased to explain our actions. If we are unable to contact a representative after 24 hours, the autopsy may be performed.

The autopsy

An autopsy is an examination of the body to determine the cause and manner of death and assess any abnormalities that may be present. A complete forensic autopsy includes a review of the decedent's medical history. Small specimens (biopsies) of internal organs are examined, and samples of body fluids are retained and tested for drugs and other substances. In deaths resulting from violence, other types of evidence may be collected and examined by a crime laboratory or other agency.

In some cases, it may be necessary to retain larger portions of tissues, or occasionally even whole organs, for additional or specialized examination. After such examinations, which may require many weeks, the tissues are destroyed like surgical specimens in a hospital. If you want those tissues returned after examination, contact our office in writing within two weeks of the autopsy and arrange for disposition of the tissue through a funeral director.

The autopsy and other tests rarely delay the release of the body to next-of-kin. However, final results of the autopsy report may take many weeks. In occasional cases, specialized microscopic or laboratory studies may delay the final report longer.

Autopsy requirements

In many cases of sudden or unexpected death, evidence of pre-existing natural disease will make an autopsy unnecessary.

Religious objections to autopsies

Most autopsies performed under the Minnesota Medical Examiner Statute (Chapter 390) are ordered by the Medical Examiner because the circumstances indicate there is a compelling state interest in knowing why someone has died.

Under other circumstances, the Medical Examiner determines that an autopsy is warranted, but you may feel an autopsy would be contrary to your loved one's religious beliefs. If you have objections to an autopsy, please let the Medical Examiner know right away.

We are open to discussion to try to accommodate your wishes, as long as we can fulfill the legal obligation presented by your loved one's death.

Tissue and eye donation

In many circumstances, your loved one can donate tissue or eyes even after they have died. They can be a donor even if they did not designate it on their driver's license. If you are interested in donation for your loved one, tell the Medical Examiner Investigator.

Data privacy and release of information

Basic demographic information and the cause and manner of death are matters of public record under Minnesota law. The rest of the information is confidential and treated similarly to a medical record. Information is available only to immediately next-of-kin, legal representatives and treating physicians.

In cases of homicide, Medical Examiner information and autopsy reports can only be provided to law enforcement agencies investigating the death and to the County Attorney until the matter has made its way through the courts.

Autopsy results, reports and information

It is our policy to send a letter outlining the autopsy results. The letter will contain contact information and a release form if you wish to receive a copy of the report.

Please call us at 218.362.6878. We will be happy to discuss the contents of the autopsy report with you.

Getting a death certificate

The funeral director you have chosen to handle final arrangements for your loved one can assist you in getting copies of the death certificate.

You also can obtain certificate copies from Vital Records offices in:

Lake County: 218.834.8301

Koochiching County: 218.283.1193

Carlton County: 218.384.9156

The Medical Examiner's Office cannot issue copies of death certificates.

When a loved one dies

The first thing you need to do is take care of yourself. We will share a great deal of information with you, and you will need to make several decisions. Here are a few suggestions to help guide you and your loved ones through this process:

1. Involve your family, friends and clergy for support and comfort. They will assist you in making sense of this tragic and sometimes sudden news. Call us—we can point you to resources to guide you through this difficult time.
2. Select a funeral home to help you make funeral arrangements and coordinate final disposition of your loved one's remains. If you don't know where to turn, you can call a variety of funeral homes, ask questions and obtain pricing. Any funeral home can assist with cremation.

3. Once you have chosen a funeral home, the funeral director will make arrangements to pick up and transport your loved one's remains back to the funeral home following the autopsy.
4. Keep track of all business cards given to you by law enforcement, county medical examiner, ambulance and funeral home personnel.
5. Start a file or folder to correlate all paperwork and information that will be shared with you as a result of your loved one's death.
6. Finally—remember to check in on yourself. Stress can come into one's life quickly and unexpectedly. Don't be afraid to use resources available to you in your community.

We hope the information in this brochure is helpful for you and your family. If we can be of any assistance, please contact us at the phone number on the back of this brochure. Our normal business hours are 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Our investigators can be reached 24 hours a day through 9-1-1.

Thomas P. Uncini, M.D.

Chief Medical Examiner of Carlton, Koochiching and Lake Counties