



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON FORENSIC SCIENCE

NIST
National Institute of
Standards and Technology
U.S. Department of Commerce

View of the Commission Certification of Medicolegal Death Investigators

Subcommittee
Medicolegal Death Investigation

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Commission Action

The Commission voted to adopt this Views Document on June 20, 2016, by a more than two-thirds majority vote (100% yes).

Note: This document reflects the views of the National Commission on Forensic Science, and does not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Justice or the National Institute of Standards and Technology. The portion of the document directly labeled “Views of The Commission” represents the formal Views of the Commission. Information beyond that section is provided for context. Views documents do not request specific action by the Attorney General, and thus do not require further action by the Department of Justice upon their approval by the Commission. The National Commission on Forensic Science is a Federal Advisory Committee established by the Department of Justice. For more information, please visit: <https://www.justice.gov/ncfs>.

View of the Commission

It is the view of the National Commission on Forensic Science (NCFS) that all medicolegal death investigators (MDI) and coroners (who are involved in conducting medicolegal death investigations) in the United States obtain professional certification by the end of the year 2020.

Background

The number of board-certified forensic pathologists in the United States is relatively small in comparison to the overall number of MDIs and nonphysician coroners. For the purposes of this document, an MDI is an individual employed within a coroner or medical examiner’s jurisdiction having the primary function of performing investigations to assist in determining the cause and manner of death. It is estimated that between 5,000 and 8,000 MDIs are currently employed throughout the United States. At present, only about 1,500 MDIs are certified by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI) (1-5). It is estimated that between 5,000 and 8,000 professionals would require certification under this recommendation. This number includes approximately 1,500 people currently certified but requiring recertification during the next 5 years.

Certification is a basic credential for individuals practicing within a particular industry. ABMDI “registry certification” is the primary and basic credential for medicolegal death investigators

(ABMDI “board certification” is an advanced credential). The National Research Council published two reports that emphasize the importance of improving our nation’s MDI system. This suggests that this vital community of practitioners is not properly supported to ensure competency. Unfortunately, many government agencies that have the capability to provide financial support to medical examiner or coroner offices do not give priority to enhancing professional competency of our nation’s MDIs. Federal funding to support certification of MDI practitioners is currently nonexistent. In large part, practicing physicians are required to obtain and maintain board certification to work in their specialty areas, whereas the same is not true for MDIs. Traditionally, forensic pathologists seeking board certification bear the cost of certification themselves, often as a prerequisite for employment. Well-established certification bodies such as the American Board of Pathology exist to provide such board certification. The ABMDI serves this purpose for MDIs, but employers often do not require this credentialing.

APPENDIX A

Table 1. Estimated cost of ABMDI certification

Group	Number	Already ABMDI Certified or Registered (Estimated)	Need Certification	Initial Cost at \$450
Investigators	6061	1000	5061	2,277,450
Coroners	1939	500	1439	647,550
Total	8000	1500	6,500	2,925,000

In addition to the initial costs for certification, ABMDI requires 45 hours of continuing education (CE) credit every 5 years to maintain ABMDI certification. Some credit can be obtained via on-line CE programs, but it is recommended that funding be provided for the registration fee for two 1-week CE-approved courses during the 5-year period for each eligible person. As of the start of this program, approximately 1,500 people would have already been certified, so approximately 6,500 new certifications would be needed during the 5-year program, or an average of 1,300 new certifications per year. Continuing education requirements would apply to those who became certified in the first 4 years of the program as well as to the 1,500 people certified prior to the start of the program whose certifications would lapse. A key element of the program's success is to maintain the certification of those who become certified.

The annual certification maintenance costs would increase each year as the number of people certified increases cumulatively each year-to-date. Based on the assumption that a maximum expense approach is taken to ensure initial certification of 6,500 people and ongoing certification of all 8,000 eligible people, estimated costs are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Projected certification costs for a 5-year implementation plan

Certification Rate	All Certification-Related Costs	Certification Costs Only
20% Year 1 (1,300 people) (1,500 need maintenance fee) (1,500 need CME fee) <small>CME is for the 1,500 people already certified</small>	Initial \$585,000 Maintenance 75,000 CME fee 900,000 Total 1,560,000	\$660,000
20% Year 2 (1,300 people) (2,800 need maintenance fee) (1,300 need CME fee) <small>CME is for the 1,300 certified in Year 1</small>	Initial \$585,000 Maintenance 140,000 CME fee 780,000 Total 1,505,000	\$725,000
20% Year 3 (1,300 people) (4,100 need maintenance fee) (1,300 need CME fee) <small>CME is for the 1,300 certified in Year 2</small>	Initial \$585,000 Maintenance 205,000 CME fee 780,000 Total 1,570,000	\$790,000

Certification Rate	All Certification-Related Costs	Certification Costs Only
20% Year 4 (1,300 people) (5,400 need maintenance fee) (2,800 need CME fee) <small>CME is for the 1,300 certified in Year 3 and a second CME course for the original 1,500</small>	Initial \$585,000 Maintenance 270,000 CME fee 1,680,000 Total 2,535,000	\$855,000
20% Year 5 (1,300 people) (6,700 need maintenance fee) (5,200 need CME fee) <small>CME is for the second CME course for those certified in Years 1-4</small>	Initial \$585,000 Maintenance 335,000 CME fee 3,120,000 Total 4,040,000	\$920,000
100% of eligible people certified within 5 years	Total 11,210,000	\$3,950,000

The total cost for a universal national medicolegal death investigation personnel certification program would range from \$1,505,000 to \$4,040,000 per year, with a total cost of \$11,210,000 over the 5-year period, resulting in 100 percent of personnel being certified by the end of year 2020. At the end of the 5-year program period, individuals or their employers would be expected to cover certification costs incurred after year 2020.

APPENDIX B

Certification

Registry certification conferred by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI) is the basic credential for certification of medicolegal death investigators, to include coroners functioning as medicolegal death investigators. This certification currently requires the person to be employed by a medical examiner or coroner office, have a minimum of 640 hours of death investigation experience, have signed professional references, and have successfully passed an examination. The Registry examination involves 240 multiple-choice questions from a training text based upon the NIJ's *Death Investigation: A Guide for the Scene Investigator*, first published in 1999 and updated in 2011, which was developed by a National Medicolegal Review Panel. The material covers the following areas: interacting with federal, state, and local agencies; communicating; interacting with families; investigating deaths; identifying and preserving evidence; maintaining ethical and legal responsibilities; demonstrating scientific knowledge; and coping with job-related stress. The following principles are emphasized: photographing the body, conducting a superficial external body examination, preserving evidence on the body, establishing decedent identification, documenting post-mortem changes, participating in a scene debriefing, determining notification of death procedures, and ensuring the security of the remains. The investigator must also affirm the ABMDI Code of Ethics.

References

- 1) Personal communication. Julie Howe. American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators. September 12, 2014.
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- 3) Scientific Working Group on Medicolegal Death Investigation. Regional Medicolegal Autopsy and Death Investigation Centers -Construction, Staffing, and Costs- A Report and Recommendations. September 2013. Available at: <http://www.swgmdi.org/images/si6.facilityconstruction.published.9-17-13.pdf> Accessed January 7, 2015.
- 4) Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report. Medical Examiners and Coroners' Offices, 2004. U.S. Department of Justice, 2007. Available at: <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/meco04.pdf> Accessed January 7, 2015.
- 5) Hanzlick R. NAME-L Survey of Medicolegal Death Investigator Numbers in Non-Coroner States. Survey conducted January 7-10, 2014.