

## **GROUP AIMS TO BRING MEDICAL EXAMINER CODE UP TO DATE**

**Brenda Battel**

**Tribune Staff Writer**

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UPPER THUMB -- The state of Michigan has not changed its medical examiner statute since the 1950s.

And even then, only minor revisions were made, said Heidi Hilliard, project coordinator for the Revision of the Michigan Medical Examiner's System Project.

With no set standards for medical examiners (ME), state officials had no answer a few years ago when the Federal Bureau of Investigation asked how many opioid overdose deaths had taken place in Michigan, Hilliard said.

The state also had no way of notifying ME's statewide about the recent Hepatitis A outbreak, which is a major public health issue.

According to a handout from the meeting, the project has identified the following weaknesses of the current system:

- Lack of mandated qualification and standardized training for ME's and medical examiner investigators (MEI's).
- No mandated death scene investigation standards, forensic autopsy standards or accreditation of forensic pathologist.
- Shortage of forensic autopsy facilities and forensic pathologists.
- No standardized data collection and reporting requirements.
- No coordinating entity or leadership within the system to provide support, vie for funding or represent the system at the state or national level.

New legislation is being crafted to address such dilemmas.

"They're going to standardize, (accredit) and license the whole system across the whole state," Huron County Commissioner John L. Bodis recently told the Tribune. He recently attended a regional meeting in Bay City for the project.

In 2015, the state's Department of Health and Human Services contracted with the Michigan Public Health Institute (MPHI) to form the workgroup for the project. It includes attorneys, prosecutors, emergency medical service personnel, forensic pathologists, funeral directors, law enforcement personnel, government officials and universities.

In late 2016, MPHI received a two-year grant to continue its work. Recommendations resulting from the project include:

- Mandated training and qualification standards for ME's and MEI'S.
- Death scene investigation standards.
- Autopsy standards.
- Data systems and reporting.
- Regionalization of the Michigan Medical Examiner System: Requires counties to choose a board certified forensic pathologist as chief ME, who would be chosen by county commissioners.
- Creation of a state ME and state MEI code.
- Creation of an advisory board, including prosecutors, law enforcement, funeral directors county administrators and commissioners, state and local health department officials.

Under current regulations, the only requirement for an ME is that they be a medical doctor, Hilliard said.

No forensics training is provided in medical school, she added.

Sometimes, if foul play is later suspected: "The evidence gets buried or cremated before anyone knows about it ... (how to perform an autopsy is) not something that all doctors know about."

Many medical doctors, and therefore, ME's don't know when the best time is to perform an autopsy, she added.

However, there are national standards, Hilliard said, established by the National Association of Medical Examiners. Those could be adopted by the state, which she says is far behind in its regulations.

The cost of updated ME and MEI services is under review as well, but has not been determined, Hilliard said.

Hilliard said it could be a year or two before any type of law goes into effect.

Officials expect that Huron County's ME/MEI duties will be part of a regional effort. Tuscola, Sanilac and Huron counties each use the morgue in Lapeer. There are counties in the western Upper Peninsula that have to ship bodies to Wisconsin or Minnesota for autopsies, Bodis said. There is also an ME who covers 19 Michigan counties.

Russell L. Bush, M.D., serves as ME for numerous counties, including Huron. His role is to determine the cause of death. The body would then be shipped to Lapeer if an autopsy is needed.

Kanu Virani, M.D., who is a forensic pathologist, handles duties for Huron if further investigation is required via autopsy.

But there are no current requirements for a ME to be a forensic pathologist, Hilliard said.

The new regulations have been amended to require that an ME be, or work under, a forensic pathologist, Hilliard said. Some counties are happy with their medical examiner, and want to keep that person in place -- even if he or she is a medical doctor only.

And there is a shortage of forensic pathologists nationwide, added Bodis.

Hilliard said the broad consensus is that the ME/MEI system as it exists is not adequate. "(Michigan has) been in this situation for so long, we think its normal. But other states see us as living in the Stone Age."

"Let's raise the standards so that autopsies are being ordered the same way no matter where you live," she said. "And autopsies are being conducted the same way no matter where you live."