



North Carolina Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

Deborah Radisch, MD, MPH, Chief Medical Examiner

GUIDELINES FOR PHYSICIANS, HOSPITALS AND MEDICAL EXAMINERS ON INFANT AND CHILD DEATHS

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For hospital staff/physicians:

Hospital staff frequently see injured and dead children in emergency rooms and as inpatients. If there are suspicions of a criminal act, the appropriate **law enforcement** agency must be notified as soon as practical, pursuant to North Carolina statutes (NCGS 90-21.20). As medical examiner jurisdiction attaches at death, NC General Statutes regarding handling of bodies and evidence must also be adhered to.

Deaths that must be reported to the **county medical examiner:**

- Any death caused by trauma, regardless of the time interval between the initial injury and the death.
- All deaths due to suspected child abuse/neglect.
- Sudden, unexpected deaths in children in previous good health – no known cause.
- The unattended death of a child.
- Suspected drug overdose deaths.
- Any death due to external means (drowning, burns, etc).

Depending on the circumstances, the medical examiner may or may not accept the case (assume jurisdiction). If jurisdiction is accepted, the medical examiner will also determine whether an autopsy needs to be performed. If there are questions about these decisions, please discuss them with the medical examiner. If s/he cannot answer them, s/he will contact a state office pathologist. The medical examiner will complete the death certificate in these cases.

When the death falls under the jurisdiction of the medical examiner, you **must:**

- Send clothing and medications (non-hospital) with the body.
- Secure admission blood sample(s) for the medical examiner.
- NOT clean the baby or remove any medical intervention devices.
- NOT alter the body, or cut the hair.
- NOT perform diagnostic procedures after the death is pronounced.
- Contact the local medical examiner if the family desires organ donation.

If law enforcement and/or hospital personnel suspect abuse or neglect, viewing and physical contact (hand holding/touching) is allowed only in the presence of the investigating law enforcement agency or its proxy. There may be no physical contact if the above cannot be accommodated. In any non-suspicious cases, physical contact and holding is permitted with supervision by either hospital personnel or the investigating law enforcement agency, if the latter is already present.

Memory cards and bereavement boxes are allowed; however, when hand/foot printing it is important to wipe the hands and feet of ink before they are sent to the morgue. **Do not** clean the body itself, only that which is printed. Hospital staff assume all risk and responsibility for the possibility of destruction of evidence when performing these procedures.

For medical examiners:

When the medical examiner is contacted to investigate the death of a child, several steps need to be followed:

- If a child (less than 18 years old) dies suddenly and unexpectedly, contact the appropriate **law enforcement** agency to conduct a scene investigation. Law enforcement will respond to the scene where the child was found and also to the hospital scene, if the child was taken to that facility for resuscitation or treatment. Training in infant death investigation and scene reconstruction has been provided to most law enforcement agencies in North Carolina.
- When an infant dies, and it is not obvious by external examination or preliminary history what may have caused the death, an autopsy will be ordered. The medical examiner death certificate, which must be filed in 3 days, should be left as “pending” for both cause and manner, since the autopsy results and the complete investigation will not be finalized for weeks or months. At that time, a supplemental death certificate will be sent for approval and signature. However, if the autopsy reveals a definite cause of death, that should be entered on the death certificate so that it can be filed without delay.
- Contact the **county DSS** to inform them of the death and to learn if the child or its family were/are clients. If so, the agency will be able to tell you if there is any history related to the decedent and/or family that is relevant to the investigation of the death.
- Consult with the pathology facility performing the autopsy if organ donation is requested.

Please contact the OCME child death investigator if there are any questions regarding policy or investigations, (919) 445-4415.