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## The Physician Assistant as Forensic Investigator

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**ABSTRACT:** Physician assistants are employed as forensic investigators at the Office of the Medical Examiner, Suffolk County, New York. We describe the educational qualifications of physician assistants and their valuable role in forensic medicine in Suffolk County.

**KEYWORDS:** forensic science, criminalistics, medical personnel, education

Perplexing questions about causes and manners of deaths frequently are answered by information derived from sources beyond the autopsy room, the microscope, or the laboratory. Consequently, in many instances, the soundness of medicolegal decisions is limited by the expertise and thoroughness of investigations into the histories of decedents, circumstances surrounding deaths, and evaluations of environmental evidence. It follows as forensic reality that ineffective, incomplete, or inefficient death investigations guarantee erroneous medicolegal conclusions. For all of the foregoing reasons, innovations and improvements in systems of death investigation should be publicized.

Experience gained at the Office of the Medical Examiner of Suffolk County, New York indicates that physician assistants (P.A.s) are ideally qualified as potential forensic investigators who can perform optimal death investigations. We are unaware of any other medicolegal jurisdiction that employs P.A.s for this purpose. Since our system works so well and may be unique, we wish to share our experience with the forensic community. Therefore, this paper describes the educational qualifications of P.A.s and their use as forensic investigators in Suffolk County.

### The Jurisdiction

Suffolk County, New York comprising the eastern two thirds of Long Island, has a land area of 900 square miles (2330 km<sup>2</sup>), contains large amounts of inland and coastal waters, has a year-round population of 1.3 million, and receives a summer influx of approximately 300 000 to 400 000 transient residents. The western part of the county is a densely populated suburban environment, and the eastern part of the county is a rural and agricultural area with many summer homes and resorts.

Approximately 4 600 of the 10 500 annual deaths in Suffolk County are reported to the Office of the Medical Examiner and require some form of medicolegal investigation. Because of the geographic configuration of Long Island, some scene investigations are conducted as far as 75 miles (120 km) from the office.

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### **Background of the Investigative System in Suffolk County**

Suffolk County, New York replaced the coroner system with an appointed medical examiner in 1960. Sidney B. Weinberg, M.D., served as the Chief Medical Examiner from 1960 to 4 Feb. 1985. Before 1977, field investigations for the Office of the Medical Examiner were conducted by physician-practitioners who worked part-time as deputy medical examiners and police surgeons comparable to the system in New York City. In 1977, two P.A.s were hired as full-time forensic investigators, and in the following eight years, five more full-time P.A. investigators were added to the staff. The number of physician deputy medical examiners and police surgeons has been reduced from twenty to five during the same interval.

### **Educational Qualification of Physician Assistants**

Physician assistants are a recent addition to the medical profession. In 1971, Congress passed the Health Manpower Act because of a need for primary care practitioners to work in the typically underserved rural areas. In 1973, Duke University was the first to start a program to train these needed personnel. Returning Vietnam corpsmen proved to be excellent candidates because they were highly skilled and experienced but were unable to use their skills in the U.S. medical system. Currently, most P.A.s have obtained an undergraduate college degree and have two years of "on the job" medical experience before admission to a P.A. program.

The first year of the P.A. curriculum is an extensive didactic program covering the basic sciences as well as an overview of the medical specialties and subspecialties. The second twelve months provides the P.A. with clinical experience by rotations through the medical and surgical specialties. No P.A. program offers any formal education in forensic medicine.

After graduation from an accredited P.A. program, each graduate may take a test for national certification. The examination, consisting of a written section as well as observation of clinical skills, is given by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants. Successful completion of this examination is required by most states before a P.A. can be employed. This certification must be renewed every two years by accruing 100 h of accredited continuing medical education. Furthermore, every six years the P.A. must pass a recertification examination.

Presently, there are 51 accredited physician assistant programs. Each is accredited by the Committee on Allied Health Education and Accreditation of the American Medical Association. Of these 51 programs, the majority have direct medical school or university affiliation or both.

### **Duties and Responsibilities of the Forensic Investigator**

The P.A. forensic investigators' duties and responsibilities encompass areas inside as well as outside the office. The P.A. is the medical examiner's representative at all scenes of death except homicides. The P.A. pronounces death and collects pertinent information regarding circumstances of the death. Routinely, they interview family, friends, and witnesses seeking information about the decedent's medical history, recent illnesses, activities, and other important information regarding circumstances of death. The P.A. also reports any environmental factors that could be relevant to the cause or manner of death.

After the scene investigation is completed, the P.A. compiles the information into a preliminary report which is presented at a daily meeting of the medical examiner staff, including the chief medical examiner, pathologists, toxicologists, and criminalistics personnel. Following the initial departmental meeting, additional information deemed necessary is sought by the P.A. Such followup includes interviewing of treating physicians, study of appropriate hospital records, or recontacting of police personnel or family.

The physician assistants are also responsible for clearing cremations of deaths that occur in this county. Generally, these deaths are reported to the office by funeral directors who give the P.A. historical information as well as the cause of death. This information is confirmed with the attending M.D. or family members before issuance of cremation clearance.

As in many jurisdictions, public awareness and enforcement of drunk driving laws has increased. The P.A.s in Suffolk have been delegated the responsibility of drawing blood samples from arrested potential driving while intoxicated (DWI) offenders, and provide this service 24 h a day, seven days a week.

Finally, the P.A.s represent the office as instructors and public speakers before a variety of organizations such as schools, police training programs, and civic groups to discuss the functions and legal responsibilities of the office.

### **Conclusion**

We believe that P.A.s are exceptionally well qualified to be trained and employed as forensic investigators, and that the system of death investigation developed in Suffolk County, New York since 1977 has many positive features with general applicability. Medicolegal officials should be aware of the potential value of the P.A. when expanding or redesigning their investigative staffs.

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