

BRIEF COMMUNICATION

Randy Hanzlick,¹ M.D.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Medical Examiner/Coroner Information Sharing Program (MecISP)

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ABSTRACT: In 1986, the Centers for Disease and Prevention established the Medical Examiner and Coroner Information Sharing Program (MecISP) with four primary goals: 1) To improve the quality of death investigations in the United States and to promote more standardized practices concerning when and how to conduct these investigations; 2) to facilitate communication among death investigators, the public health community, federal agencies, and other interested groups. 3) to improve the quality, completeness, management, and dissemination of information regarding investigated deaths; and 4) to promote the sharing and use of medical examiner/coroner death investigation data. Major MecISP projects have included periodic production of a directory of death investigators in the United States and Canada, creation of standard and generic death investigation report forms, development of death investigation data sets, and collection of death investigation data from medical examiner/coroner offices. MecISP also conducts site visits to assist in office computerization, supports educational meetings and the development of training materials for death investigators, facilitates ongoing projects of relevant professional organizations, contributes publications to the death investigation literature, conducts surveillance of selected types of deaths, and responds to specific inquiries from medical examiners and coroners about administrative and practical death investigation issues.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, forensic pathology, MecISP, medical examiners, coroners, death investigation, surveillance

In 1986, the Centers for Disease and Prevention established the Medical Examiner and Coroner Information Sharing Program (MecISP). MecISP has four primary goals: 1) To improve the quality of death investigations in the United States and to promote more standardized practices concerning when and how to conduct these investigations; 2) to facilitate communication among death investigators, the public health community, federal agencies, and other interested groups; 3) to improve the quality, completeness, management, and dissemination of information regarding investigated deaths; and 4) to promote the sharing and use of medical examiner/coroner death investigation data. This article summarizes the major projects that MecISP has undertaken in pursuit of these

goals, in order to increase awareness of what MecISP may be able to provide to the death investigation community.

Summary of Projects

Death Investigation in the United States and Canada

A manual first published by CDC in 1990, consists of a summary of death investigation laws by jurisdiction and a listing of contact persons for the more than 2000 death investigation jurisdictions in the United States and Canada. The manual has been updated every two years. The most recent version was updated in 1995 and distributed in 1996. Because of continual changes in personnel in charge of individual death investigation jurisdictions, work is being done to make the information electronically available online so as to facilitate both its dissemination and updating. The manual can be obtained from CDC by contacting MecISP.

DIRFs—DIRFs are generic death investigation report forms that may be used to document death investigations. One form (IDIRF) is designed for the investigator who conducts the initial phases of an investigation. The second form (CDIRF) is for the certifier or other person who "finalizes" or brings to closure a death investigation (2). A similar form for investigation of sudden, unexplained infant deaths (SUIDIRF) has been developed in conjunction with the Interagency Sudden Infant Death Syndrome Panel's efforts to develop a standard scene investigation protocol (3,4). The DIRFs and SUIDIRF are available from MecISP in printed or electronic form, and may be modified to meet the needs of an individual office. A questionnaire-style worksheet to complement SUIDIRF is also available.

MecDIDS—CDC has developed a medical examiner/coroner death investigation data set (MecDIDS) for guiding the creation of electronic data bases pertaining to routine death investigation information. The MecDIDS manual offers suggested names, content, and field lengths for the various items of information that are collected during routine death investigations. Although the MecDIDS manual has not been published in a journal, it is available in printed or electronic form from MecISP.

MecISM—As a follow up to MecDIDS, CDC has contracted with a firm to develop a medical examiner/coroner information systems manual designed to guide users in the development of computer-based ME/C data bases and data management programs.

¹ Associate professor of Forensic Pathology, Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta, GA.

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MecISM is expected to be available from MecISP within the next few months.

Data—MecISP has more than 0.75 million ME/C death investigation records in electronic format from various ME/C offices in the United States. Unfortunately, because most offices have unique data base structures and software, data exist in various formats. CDC has contracted with a firm to develop programs to convert important items of information to a standard format and into a common data base that can be queried on-line (with personal identifiers expunged). The first iteration will be available on-line within the next year.

Surveillance—The medical examiner/coroner electronic mortality, epidemiologic research, and surveillance information system (MecEMESIS) is in the planning and development stages, but will, through greater use of electronic communication facilitate 1) dissemination of information; 2) routine, periodic reporting of ME/C case series data; and 3) rapid reporting of deaths that are defined by MecISP (in conjunction with other agencies) as "sentinel" or reportable events. Such deaths might include deaths related to tainted or defective consumer products, medical devices, or newly appearing illicit drugs, for example. MecISP may be able to serve as an information "clearinghouse" capable of referring data to other interested agencies.

Publications—MecISP staff have participated in the authorship of publications related to medical examiners, coroners, death investigation, and computerization (4–7). Some other publications include information that may be used as guidelines (8,9). A review article on the use of ME/C data for epidemiologic research and public health surveillance has also recently been published (10).

Other MecISP Activities

MecISP has also 1) made site visits to assist in the automation of ME/C office information; 2) supported activities such as the National Association of Medical Examiner's Pediatric Toxicology Registry; 3) helped to develop grants of interest to the death investigation and public health communities; 4) been involved with committees that address death investigation issues; 5) responded to individual inquiries regarding death investigation problems or death investigation cases with possible public health ramifications; 6) supported public health-related meetings of medical examiners/coroners; and 7) supported the development of training materials for medical examiner/coroners and death investigators.

Limitations

An independent program evaluation during 1994 concluded that MecISP has provided valuable services but lacks the staff and

funding needed to meet its goals. Several of the projects described above were initiated on the basis of recommendations in the program review. Until greater funding and staffing can be obtained, MecISP will continue to do what it can to meet its goals.

Organization, Funding, and Staffing

MecISP is a program of the Surveillance and Programs Branch (SPB), Division of Environmental Hazards and Health Effects (DEHHE), National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia (USA). MecISP, SPB, DEHHE, and NCEH are housed in one building at CDC's Chamblee Campus. R. Gibson Parrish, M.D. is the SPB Chief, Henry Falk, M.D., is DEHHE Director, and Richard Jackson, M.D., is NCEH Director. Of 12 full-time equivalent positions in SPB, approximately two are allocated exclusively for MecISP activities, and MecISP has an annual operating budget (excluding salaries) of approximately \$75,000. Other SPB staff, although participating in some MecISP activities, also have duties in other programs. MecISP may be contacted via CDC at 4770 Buford Hwy NE, MailStop F47, Atlanta, Georgia 30341-3724; phone (770)488-7060; fax (770)488-7454; email MECISP1@em.cdc.gov.

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Additional information and reprint requests:

Randy Hanzlick, MD
916 Cumberland Road NE
Atlanta, GA 30306

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The e-mail address for the CDC's Medical Examiner/Coroner Information Sharing Program (MecISP) is **MECISP1@cdc.gov**, not MECISP1@em.cdc.gov as published in J Forensic Sciences 1997;42:531-533 [error on page 533].