

## BOOK REVIEW

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### Review of: *Death Investigation in America. Coroners, Medical Examiners, and the Pursuit of Medical Certainty*

**REFERENCE:** Jentzen JM. *Death investigation in America. Coroners, medical examiners, and the pursuit of medical certainty*. England: Cambridge Massachusetts and London, Harvard Press, 2009, 290 pp.

Jeffery Jentzen, former Chief Medical Examiner of Milwaukee County and current Director of Autopsy Services at the University of Michigan, tells the story of death investigation in America by discussing 10 major topics relevant to death investigation since the 1800s. The book is replete with stories about people and events, historical perspectives, literary references, and citations of personal communications and other sources. Jentzen's work is not encyclopedic but does provide a firm grasp of the major events impacting on medicolegal death investigation along with accounts of, responses to, and outcomes of those events.

"Good and Lawful Men" provides a brief history of coroners and unsuccessful efforts to abolish coroners prior to the 20th century, along with the medical profession's initial interest in, and ultimate frustration with death investigation and the courts. "The Rockefeller Philanthropy and the Harvard Dream" detail the rise and fall of the Harvard Department of Legal Medicine along with Alan Moritz' work there, which on a basic level provided a model on which future systems could be built. "A Model Law" chronicles the development of the 1954 Model Postmortem Examinations Act, coroner reform in Oregon and Chicago, and the long-term debate between coroner advocate Samuel Gerber (a coroner) and coroner abolitionist Richard Childs of the National Municipal League. "Creating an Identity" reports the emergence of forensic pathology as a board certified specialty, the formation of the National Association of Medical Examiners and The Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, and discussion of a lack of federal support for death investigation. "In Search of Authority" utilizes details about the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy, the death of Mary Jo Kopechne at Chappaquiddick, the Black Panther shoot-out in Chicago, and the Attica State Prison shootings to illustrate major deficiencies in death investigation systems, the important contributions that trained forensic pathologists can make to death investigation, and the unfortunate reality that it often takes a public crisis to effect positive change. "Autonomy Challenged" recounts the impact of organ and tissue procurement on medical examiners and coroners as well as euthanasia and issues of religious freedom. "Beyond Vital Statistics" focuses on the Midwest heat wave of 1995, death certificates, industrial

hygiene, alcohol and driving, sudden infant deaths, and violent deaths to illustrate the emerging and growing use of medical examiner and coroner data for public health purposes while citing the lack of significant funding and other support from agenda-driven public health agencies. "The Road to Demedicalization" chronicles the transfer of physician authority to nonmedical or allied medical personnel, the impact of that on the perpetuation of coroner systems, and greater reliance on nonphysician personnel in death investigation systems. "The Popularization of Forensic Pathology" describes how literature and the media have played mostly positive roles in popularizing forensic pathologists in what Jentzen describes as the detective period (1840–1929), the scientific period (1929–1963), the medical expert period (1963–1990), and the heroic period (1990 to present). "In Search of Reasonable Medical Certainty" discusses science and the law and the changes that medical expert death investigators have witnessed in terms of admissibility of evidence, evidence-based medicine, and the inherent conflicts between justice, science, and certainty.

The names of numerous people involved or interested in death investigation in the 20th century, many of the names familiar to forensic pathologists, are included in the book along with accounts of their activities. Such names include R.B.H. Gradwohl, Richard Childs, Charles Norris, Oscar Schultz, Frances Glessner Lee, George Magrath, Alan Moritz, Samuel Gerber, Timothy Leary, Russell Fisher, Richard Ford, Milton Helpem, Stanley Durlacher, Joseph Davis, John Coe, Lester Adelson, Charles Larson, Ali Hameli, Geoffrey Mann, Gordon Hennigar, Thomas Noguchi, James Luke, and many others. Jentzen provides considerable information about such people and helps us understand their professional interests as well as their connections with, and impact upon each other and death investigation.

A few minor errors exist in the book. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Medical Examiner and Coroner Information Sharing Program (MECISP) is incorrectly described as the Medical Examiner and Coroner Information System. The late South Carolina forensic pathologist Gordon Hennigar's name is misspelled as Henninger throughout. Julia Goodin (and Ann Dixon of the Baltimore Medical Examiner Office) rather than Jan Garavaglia (who has done much to popularize the forensic pathology and inform the public) provided the inspiration for the female forensic pathologist character in "Homicide: Life on the Streets." Any other errors would need to be brought to Jentzen's attention by readers other than myself.

For anyone interested in the history of death investigation, Jentzen's book is well worth reading. Even those with fairly extensive knowledge of the subject will find it informative or a

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good refresher. Do not expect extensive information about the death investigation system in each state, but rather, a more global view placed in a historical, national, and philosophical perspective.

The bottom line of Jentzen's book is that over the past 150 years, efforts to improve death investigation in America by making it more medical and scientific have been disappointing and have seen only a modicum of success. His book explains why.