The Role of the Medical Examiner: Death and Public Health

Carraugh Reilly Nowak, MFS, D-ABMDI
Karen Biel Costantino, RN, BSN
About the Erie County Medical Examiner’s Office

- Over 2600 reported deaths
- Around 1200 cases (autopsies/exams/etc)
- Tox & Histo:
  - 50% of cases complete by 30 days
  - 80% of cases complete by 60 days
  - 99% of cases complete by 90 days
HE WAS INVOLVED IN SOME SORT OF BAKING ACCIDENT... WE'RE CALLING HIM JOHN DOUGH...
About the Erie County Medical Examiner’s Office

- **Who works there?**
  - Administrative
    - Admin. Coordinator
    - Clerical Staff
  - Forensic Pathologists
    - Chief Medical Examiner
    - Assoc. Chief Medical Examiners
  - Forensic Toxicologists
    - Chief County Toxicologist
    - Toxicologists
  - Investigators
    - Medical Investigators
    - Scene Investigators
    - Morgue Keepers
  - Histologist
  - Pathological Lab Assistants

- **Law Enforcement/DAs/Ancillary/Forensic Scientists**
Medicolegal Death Investigation
Medicolegal Death Investigation: Jurisdiction

- Notification of Death
- ME Jurisdiction
  - Scene/Background Investigation
  - Ancillary Tests
  - Forensic Autopsy
- Not ME Jurisdiction
  - Investigation Report
- Certification of Death
Medicolegal Death Investigation

- The purpose of the investigation is to determine:
  - Who?
  - What?
  - When?
  - Where?
  - Why?
  - How?
Medicolegal Death Investigation: Components

- Scene Investigation
- Background Investigation
- Ancillary Studies
  - Toxicology
  - Radiology
  - Clinical Labs
  - Others
Medicolegal Death Investigation

- These investigations put together a story and timeline of the last years, months, days and hours of an individual’s life
- This “story” is taken into consideration during the autopsy
Forensic or Medicolegal Autopsy

- The purpose of the autopsy is to establish the cause and manner of death through the:
  - Documentation of internal and external injuries
  - Collection of medical evidence such as tissues, fluids and trace evidence
  - Reconstruction of the injuries

Does this all correspond??
Goal of Medical Examiner’s Office:

Certification of Death

(AKA: Death Certificate)
“Cause of death is still unknown. We hope to learn more once he’s dead.”
Death Certificate – Who Issues It?

- Physician/Doctor
- Medical Examiner
Death Certificate - What Does It Show?

- Identifies the individual
- States the Cause and Manner of death
  - Cause – what actually caused the person to die, i.e. heart attack
  - Manner – 5 types:
    - Natural
    - Accident
    - Homicide
    - Suicide
    - Undetermined
Death Certificate - Why Is It Important?

- Closure for family
- Settling of estates/insurance, etc.
- Cause and Manner
  - Legal – criminal and civil litigation
  - Public Health
Epidemiology & Disease (Death) Prevention

- H1N1
- Myocarditis
- Co-Sleeping
- Cancer Registry
- DMV Reports
Mass Fatality And Pandemic Disease Planning

Basics:
- Structure
- Flexibility
- All-Hazards
Mass Fatality Plan

- COOP (Continuity of Operations Plan)
- MERT (Medical Examiner’s Response Team)
- Forms
- Phases
Additions Specific to Flight 3407

- COOP
  - External Assistance

- MERT
  - Designated Staff
    - Family
    - Office
    - Scene
  - External Assistance
  - Numbering System

- Forms
  - DMORT (Disaster Mortuary Response Team)

- Phases
  - III
Lessons Learned

- Updates to the ECMEO Mass Fatality Plan
  - Family Assistance Designee
  - MERT Office Division
  - Additional Phase
Pandemic Disease Plan

- Jurisdiction
- Autopsy
- Reporting
- PPE/Employee Prophylaxis
- Decontamination
Additions Specific to H1N1

- **Jurisdiction**
  - After Sentinel Cases, most not ME
  - Confirmed /suspected cases of H1N1, not ME

- **Autopsy** – 4 H1N1, 1 Influenza A
  - Only Sentinel Cases and unconfirmed

- **Reporting**
  - All samples sent to NYS Lab at Wadsworth

- **PPE/Employee Prophylaxis**
  - CDC Guidelines utilized at all times

- **Decontamination**
  - CDC Guidelines utilized at all times
Lessons Learned

- Updates to the ECMEO Pandemic Disease Plan
  - Definition of Sentinel Case
  - CDC Guidelines
QUESTIONS????????

Erie County Medical Examiner’s Office
503 Kensington Ave. (ECMC Campus)
961-7591
How can you be involved?

- Interns - ECMEO offers internships to college students
- Volunteers - Specialized Medical Assistance Response Team (SMART)
  - www.erie.gov/health/smart
THANK YOU!!!