



Vermont Office of the Chief Medical Examiner to Host Conference for Death Investigators

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Vermont Department of Health

BURLINGTON – “Bleaching, longitudinal cracking and disintegration of bones are due to the effects of.....?” will be answered in the form of a question during a game of forensics Jeopardy on Saturday at a death investigation training for assistant medical examiners, hosted by the Vermont Department of Health’s Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME).

The game is designed to lighten a day of presentations and discussions about serious and difficult topics including bodies in water, preparing for trial, strangulation, and domestic violence. The conference is hosted by a multidisciplinary team of local experts including state medical examiner staff, Office of the Attorney General, Fletcher Allen Health Care, and Colchester Technical Rescue.

More than 100 investigators will attend the conference at the University of Vermont (Rowell Auditorium 103). Fourteen of the investigators attending the conference have served in Vermont for the past 10 years, and will be recognized during the lunch break (12:30 p.m. to 1:30 p.m.).

“Our assistant medical examiners are our eyes and ears of the pathologist in the field.” said Chief Medical Examiner Steve Shapiro, MD. “This can be a very stressful job and they serve a vital role in the state. The training is designed to improve their education, knowledge and clinical skill, as their role becomes increasingly more complex.”

The OCME provides public health and health care policy makers with critical, expert information, shaping public policy such as seat belt laws or revealing trends in infectious diseases that may protect the health of all Vermonters. The OCME investigates more than 1,000 cases each year, approximately 20 percent of the total number of deaths in Vermont, and completes 450 autopsies annually.

Assistant medical examiners usually have a strong medical background (nurses, nurse practitioners, physicians assistants, paramedics and advanced level EMT’s), which serves to complement the investigative skills of law enforcement. Vermont currently leads New England in the number of certified American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (20 of the 63 assistant medical examiners statewide).

There are two levels of certification: Diplomat – which requires 640 hours of death investigation experience, completion of 300 plus skills verified by the OCME, recommendation to the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI), and passing a four-hour national registry exam. Fellow – requires 4,000 hours of death investigation experience, current status as a diplomat and passing a 5.5 hour national board exam.

The Vermont medical examiner system has been in place since the 1950’s when physicians were recruited throughout the state to work as death investigators. Since then, the system has grown and evolved into the current team of assistant medical examiners.

Assistant medical examiners are death investigators appointed by the chief medical examiner and can take calls 24 hours a day/7 days a week. Many of them have other full-time jobs and are considered “volunteers” within the program. During their investigation assistant medical examiners may review medical records, interview family and friends, visit the scene and examine bodies looking for signs of trauma or foul play in coordination with law enforcement, and make decisions as to whether or not the OCME will take jurisdiction over the body.

They are paid on a fee for service basis, which is set by the Commissioner of Health.

If you are interested in becoming an assistant medical examiner, or would like more information about the conference, please contact the department’s Local Medical Examiner Coordinator Lauri McGivern via e-mail: LMcGivern@vdh.state.vt.us.

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