

The Coroner's Office

Then and Now – 334 Years of History

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The office of Coroner goes way back – all the way back to at least 1194 in England, when Richard the LionHearted was seeking money to fund wars and crusades. English sheriffs who were supposed to represent the King's interest in the shires were increasingly corrupt. Coroners ("Crowners") were put in place not just to go to the scene of unexpected deaths, including murders, but to make sure the property of executed criminals went to the King and wasn't "diverted" locally. While

that's no longer a coroner responsibility, coroners then and now investigated sudden, unexpected, and non-natural deaths, determined the cause and manner of death, and wrote death certificates.

Like so many American institutions, the U.S. coroner system began in Pennsylvania. The "Frame of Government for Pennsylvania," written in 1682 by William Penn for the land he'd been granted by King Charles II, allowed for an appointed coroner. In 1684, Penn himself appointed Chester County's first coroner, James Kanela (sometime written Kennerly), who was in office from

1685-1687. Since 1838 and continuing to the present, coroners have been elected officials. Whether headed by an appointed or elected Coroner, the Chester County Coroner's Office (CCCO) has always functioned as a death investigation agency. County archives show that early coroners were paid to examine dead bodies to ascertain the cause of death and to hold inquests. The fee for viewing a dead body in 1814 was \$2.75, approximately the cost of a week's hotel stay in Washington, D.C. at the time. Today the position is salaried, with a current annual salary of approximately \$75,000.

Medicolegal Investigation

Death investigation is at the intersection of legal and medical disciplines. In the United Kingdom, in fact, coroners are usually lawyers who head Coroner's Courts, deciding cause and manner of death through inquests where evidence is presented by forensic pathologists and other medical or forensic experts. Prior to the 1960s,

inquests were still common in Chester County and coroner inquests are still legal in our state. The purpose of coroner inquests isn't to adjudicate guilt or innocence, but to establish the facts around a death so cause and manner of death and possible criminal intent can be determined. In most cases today autopsies, toxicological and other tests, and extensive medical records allow the probable cause and manner of death to be determined without an inquest. There remain, however, the occasional "undetermined" cases or controversial situations, like deaths in police custody, where an inquest, with deliberations transparent to the public, are a potentially useful tool.

Infrastructure

A striking example of what hasn't changed much over time, at least in the last 75 years or so, is the facilities of the Coroner's Office. Not so long ago, the CCCO was housed in one small office room in a West Chester building now occupied by the Mercato Restaurant. Next an office was provided at 313 W. Market St, the current home of most County administrative offices. Around 2016, the CCCO was moved into bigger but rather depressing administrative office space at the end of a long dim corridor in the basement of the Government Services Center. When visiting our office, you might be forgiven for wondering if the idea was "out of sight, out of mind." While the administrative office has moved around, the same local hospital morgues and autopsy rooms have been in use since the 1960s. According to Dr. Harrop, who took office in 1966, before that autopsies were not infrequently conducted in the back of funeral parlors. Unfortunately, the current facilities don't meet OSHA or state Department of Labor laws. The CCCO recently failed an accreditation audit in June 2019 because of the dismal state of its morgue and autopsy space.

Coroners – Physicians or Not?

Have Chester County Coroners always been physicians? No, not until Dr. Harrop's took office in 1966! In fact, the only requirement to be a coroner in Pennsylvania is to be at least 18 years of age, a U.S. citizen, and a resident of the county for at least 30 days. It's been that way since the 1790 Constitution! For example, an early coroner, Major John Harper, was a former Revolutionary War soldier and then a saloonkeeper, before being elected coroner. Legal requirements



for coroners in Pennsylvania don't include any medical training or background, only a one-week Coroners' Education Course to be taken before being sworn into office.

What is a Coroner's Case?

We have spotty records of causes of death in the 1700s, with more extensive records for the 1800s. Looking over those 2 centuries, I was struck by the high number of drownings, something we rarely see now. The majority of these drownings were workplace accidents, with a typical description being "fell into a mill race." Boating accidents weren't unusual either. Transportation accidents typically involved horses and wagons or carts, but in the late 1800s the first train deaths were recorded. In fact, 10 fatal train accidents occurred in 1876 alone. A single train accident due to "severe weather" resulted in 7 deaths on October 5, 1877 and literally dozens of deaths were attributed to "transport accident - train" in the last decade of the 19th century.



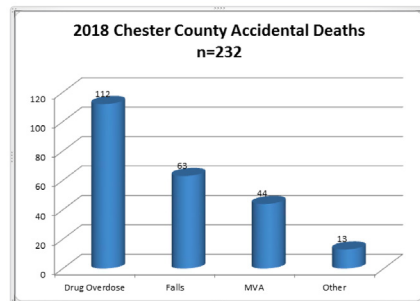
The first fatal automobile accident in our County was recorded in 1909 when a 5-year old was struck by a car. Automobile accidents and cardiovascular disease gradually dominated the caseload in the 20th century. Drunk driving and fatal motor vehicle accidents (MVAs), especially in those under 21, were a major concern in the 60's and 70's. Legislative changes concerning the drinking age, DUI definitions, and seat belts have resulted in a decline in MVAs since then. Alcohol and other substances and lack of seat use are still associated with fatal MVAs today, however.

Murders, suicides, and "substance" deaths have always been part of the coroner's caseload, but the substance in the early centuries was almost always alcohol. Other drugs became a concern in the late 1960's and Coroner Harrop—with obvious prescience—began advocating for a toxicology laboratory. Drug deaths, first called "adverse reactions to drugs and poisons," were separately tracked beginning in 1976. Today, of course, we are in the throes of an "opioid epidemic." In 2018, there was a total of 112 accidental drug overdose deaths in Chester County, with opioids present in more than 70% of cases.

Falls are currently the second most common cause of accidental death in Chester County (after drug overdoses). Coroner Rothenberger first expressed concern about this when he observed an increase in falls in those over age 65 in the late 1990's. Now we see falls contributing to accidental death primarily in those over 75. Even if it is an indirect cause of death, hospitals and hospices must notify the Coroner if a fall initiated the terminal events.

Murder has been a constant but relatively infrequent manner of death in Chester County throughout the centuries, with some variations in the cause of death. In the 1700's, murder was usually a "hands-on" event caused by beating with

heavy objects - for example, "hit in the head with a Chestnut [tree] branch." By the 20th century, stabbing and gunshot wounds had taken over, and currently gunshot wounds are the most common cause of death in homicides. In 1967, for example, 4/12 homicides were due to gunshot wounds compared with 8/11 in 2018.



Changing Technology

Handwritten notes were the only records in the early years of the office. We still take notes, but now everything is documented in increasingly complex databases. Paralleling the experience of physicians, we spend at least as much time on data entry and documentation as we do going to a scene or speaking with families.

The internet is playing a big role these days. Text messages sometimes tell us more about time of death than rigor mortis, suicide notes may be digital rather than handwritten, and online purchases of abused substances are common.

Probably the biggest game-changer for death investigations in the past 50 years, however, is DNA testing, a topic now so complex it warrants its own future article. One example will suffice for now, the case of a Vietnam era Marine, Cpl. Robert Daniel Corriveau. Found murdered on the Pennsylvania Turnpike in 1968, his body was not identified until 2012 after an exhumation to obtain DNA.

Final Thoughts

One thing that hasn't changed is that the Coroner's Office is one of the most fascinating county government agencies not just historically but every day. We have the privilege and responsibility of seeing a side of Chester County that others rarely do, and the opportunity to make a difference every day for people who have lost a family member, friend, or colleague. I encourage Chester County medical professionals to consider working or volunteering with us, especially if you are looking for a completely different way to apply your experience after retirement. ■

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