Washtenaw County Medical Examiner

2015 Annual Report

Washtenaw County Medical Examiner
300 North Ingalls
NI2D19
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109

Accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners

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Washtenaw County Board of Commissioner and Citizens of Washtenaw County

To:  Washtenaw County Board of Commissioner and Citizens of Washtenaw County

It is my pleasure to report on the activities of the Washtenaw County Medical Examiner’s Office for the year 2015. During the year, the office investigated 923 deaths and performed 401 death scene investigations. There were a total of 312 autopsies and 32 external examinations performed. There were 11 homicides, 41 suicides and 202 accident investigations registered in the County.

For the second straight year, Washtenaw County recorded the highest number of medical examiner organ and tissue donation referrals to the Gift-of-Life program resulting in 13 organ, 22 tissue and 24 eye donations. The success of this valuable program is a tribute to the strong cooperation and the dedication and hard work of our employees.

Washtenaw County, not unlike other counties around the United States, continues to suffer the tragic effects of a national heroin epidemic. In 2015, Washtenaw County recorded 40 heroin-related deaths, slightly decreased from the 44 heroin-related deaths in 2014. The medical examiner’s office continues to work with the county health department to track and publicize the epidemic. In April, the medical examiner along with officials from Wayne County, alerted local public health officials to the lethal combination of heroin with the synthetic narcotic, Fentanyl.

Once again, the medical examiner offices in conjunction with the University Of Michigan Department Of Pathology sponsored an annual two-day forensic science seminar. This seminar provides forensic science educational programing for local law enforcement and healthcare personnel to maintain and upgrade their skills in these essential public services.

I want to thank the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners and County Administration for their continued support in providing for high-quality medical examiner programing in Washtenaw County. It is a privilege to work for and serve the citizens of Washtenaw County.

Jeffrey Jentzen M.D. Medical Examiner
The Role of the Washtenaw County Medical Examiner

The Washtenaw County Medical Examiner’s Office investigates sudden, violent, unexpected, and suspicious deaths that occur in Washtenaw County. The Office of the Medical Examiner certifies death after investigation and postmortem examination and issues the death certificate as required by law. Complete findings of the death investigation are distributed to families and law enforcement agencies as appropriate.

The main duties of the Office of the Medical Examiner are to determine the cause and manner of death, and certify deaths that are reported to the medical examiner. The cause of death is the disease process or injury that resulted in death. There are thousands of diseases and injuries that may result in death. The manner of death is a classification in which a determination is made regarding whether the death resulted from natural causes, homicide, suicide, or an accident. On occasion, the manner of death is classified as indeterminate.

Information collected during the investigation helps clarify the circumstances, such as the sequence of events prior to death. Evidence collected during an investigation and/or postmortem examination may help lead to the arrest or successful conviction of a suspect in a homicide case. Because deaths occur around the clock, medical examiner staff members are available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year.

With the skill and experience of the medical examiner investigators and board-certified forensic pathologists, we believe the quality of death investigations in Washtenaw County are among the best in the State. The death scene investigation reports filed by the investigators are very thorough and supply comprehensive information to the medical examiners.

Our medical examiners and investigators also extend their duties to the living by answering questions and addressing concerns regarding deaths within the county. Medical examiner investigators frequently make personal contact with family members of a deceased and assist them by providing appropriate answers regarding the circumstances of the death. Medical examiner investigators are supplied with a pamphlet for distribution to families. The information provides answers to common questions and facts about autopsies and also provides resource information pertaining to grief counseling.
Types of Deaths Reportable to the Medical Examiner

The Michigan County Medical Examiner Law, Act 181, P.A. of 1953, as amended, and the Michigan Public Health Code, Act 368, P.A. of 1978, as amended, mandates that specific types of death be referred to the Medical Examiner for investigation (see list below). These deaths include sudden and unexpected deaths, accidental deaths, and violent deaths. The medical examiner has the authority under these Acts to order an autopsy at any time it is deemed necessary to determine or confirm the cause and manner of death.
Deaths Reportable to the Medical Examiner:

- Violent death (e.g., strangulation, gunshot, stabbing, poisoning, etc.)
- Accidental deaths (e.g., falls, drowning, motor vehicle collisions, burns, overdose, etc.)
- Death of a prisoner (e.g., deaths in any county or city jail while imprisoned or in custody).
- Suspicious Circumstances (e.g., Unidentified Bodies or events surrounding death)
- Sudden and Unexpected deaths (e.g., all deaths during a surgical procedure, in recovery, anesthesia-related, unexpected natural death, occupational-related deaths)*
- Without medical attendance within 48 hours of death:
  - In cases of chronic illness, the attending physician may sign the death certificate if s/he can be reasonably certain of the cause of death.
- Death of a mother due to an abortion.
- Unexpected infant deaths

The medical examiner would generally order an autopsy for any of the reportable deaths listed above.
### Medical Examiner Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td><strong>322,895</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of deaths within Washtenaw County</td>
<td>3,757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cases Reported to Medical Examiner</td>
<td>923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of deaths certified after postmortem examination</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Medical Examiner cases with complete autopsy</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Medical Examiner cases with external examination</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Medical Examiner cases with limited examination</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of deaths certified without postmortem examination</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of deaths not certified by Medical Examiner's Office after investigation</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of scene investigations</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of bodies transported to autopsy facility by removal service</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases tested for toxicology</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Expanded</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Basic</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases referred to Gift of Life</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Organ donors</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tissue donors</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases referred to Ever Sight</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cornea donors</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Manner of Death by Postmortem Examination

Deaths by Natural Causes
Deaths by Unnatural Causes

Accidental Deaths by Type
Accidental Deaths - Motor Vehicle Crashes

Drugs Contributing to Cause of Death
Suicide by Means

Homicide Deaths
Deaths by Age Group

<1: 21
1-5: 7
6-10: 4
11-17: 8
18-25: 40
26-44: 100
45-54: 251
55+: 482
Unknown: 10

Deaths range from 0 to 465.
For immediate release

Deaths from fentanyl up sharply in Detroit-Ann Arbor area, prompting warning from U-M experts

Deaths from powerful prescription painkiller in combination with other drugs

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — So far this year, 58 people have died from drug overdoses involving the prescription painkiller fentanyl in two counties of metropolitan Detroit, according to new data from the medical examiner offices for both counties.

The deaths, in the areas that include Ann Arbor and Detroit, mainly involved fentanyl in combination with other drugs -- including other opiate painkillers, and heroin intentionally adulterated with fentanyl.

In both counties, fentanyl-related deaths now make up about one-third of all drug-related deaths -- a sharp increase from last year.

In Wayne County, which includes Detroit, 53 deaths from fentanyl in combination with heroin, other prescription painkillers, alcohol and/or cocaine have occurred since January, compared with 68 such deaths in all of 2014.

Most of the deaths resulted from a combination of prescription painkillers called opiates, such as fentanyl with hydromorphone or with oxymorphone. Just over 20 resulted from a heroin-fentanyl combination.

The new data are from Washtenaw and Wayne County Medical Examiner’s offices. Both are run by U-M’s Department of Pathology under contract with the counties.

In Washtenaw County, which includes Ann Arbor, the heroin-fentanyl combination appears to be most worrisome. Of the 23 heroin-related deaths there since October, seven included fentanyl.

In addition, two drug users in Washtenaw County have died in 2015 after injecting what they thought was heroin, but turned out to be pure fentanyl.

As a result of this sharp rise, University of Michigan Medical School forensic pathologist and Washtenaw medical examiner Jeffrey Jentzen, M.D., Ph.D. is calling for awareness among the general public, law enforcement and medical personnel.

“We are increasingly seeing signs of what appears to be a return to the epidemic levels of ten years ago, when fentanyl-related drug overdoses were blamed for 236 excess drug deaths,” says Jentzen, who directs the U-M Health System’s Autopsy and Forensic Services division. “This combination kills even experienced drug users, who likely do not know that they’re consuming a a drug that’s 15 to 20 times more potent than heroin, and 60 to 100 times more potent than morphine.”

“This is a concerning trend that we hope to counter via awareness,” says Wayne County Medical Examiner and U-M associate professor Carl Schmidt, M.D., M.P.H.
Adds Jentzen, “Fentanyl decreases breathing to the point that you can ‘die before you get high’, and yet does not produce the high that users seek. It’s used to cut heroin, to reduce its cost.”

When prescribed by doctors, and used carefully by patients as a skin patch or oral drug, fentanyl is an effective treatment for severe cancer pain. It can also be used as an anesthetic. But when injected alone or with other drugs, it can kill quickly.

Emergency medical treatment with high doses of naloxone, an anti-opioid treatment, can prevent death from a heroin or opiate painkiller overdose if given in time.

But because fentanyl has a longer half-life in the body, it can still kill someone who has received it in combination with another drug -- even after they have been treated with naloxone for what they think is just a heroin or opiate painkiller overdose.

As a result, Jentzen notes that emergency care teams should be vigilant for longer-term effects even after treating someone for a heroin overdose.

Jentzen notes that the toxicology testing laboratory to which U-M physicians send samples for their medical examiner cases has observed a sharp rise in fentanyl-related cases around the country.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency issued an alert to law enforcement on March 18 about fentanyl, and noted upticks in deaths in several locations.

# # #
Cremation Permits over 5 year span

Number of permits issued

Year permits were issued

2002 1989 2251 2262 2355
2011 2012 2013 2014 2015