

PROJECT ECHO: OD-FIT

Overdose Fatality Investigation Techniques

Tips and Tricks for Building a Resilient Medicolegal Death Investigator's Workforce

The routine duties of medical death investigators can expose them to traumatic events contributing to burnout and compassion fatigue. It is imperative to utilize practical strategies that mitigate stress and promote resilience during challenging and changing times. Creating a positive work environment, supporting fellow staff, and implementing effective programs and practices can help the medicolegal death investigator (MDI) workforce cope with emergencies, emotional trauma, and manage day-to-day stressors of the job.

Relevant Terminology

- **Burnout**: According to the World Health Organization, burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.
- **Coping self-efficacy**: An individual's or collective's ability to cope or manage stress.

Key Takeaways

- The top reported stressors for the MDI workforce included stressors related to family members of the decedent, lack of understanding from the community about their work, fatigue, staff shortages, and working more than 24 consecutive hours to complete an assignment.
- Peer support programs, therapy animals, informal gatherings, debriefings, group and individual therapy, yoga, meditation, and family support teams are some effective strategies to reduce stress for the MDI workforce.

To learn more about the intersection of death investigations and overdose prevention, check out the session recording and slides or email odfitecho@astho.org for more information.

About the Presenter: John Fudenberg is the Executive Director for the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IACME) and conducts private consulting services in the medicolegal profession, disaster preparedness and legislative services. John retired in 2020 after over thirty years of public service in law enforcement and the medicolegal profession. In October 2017, John led the critical incident response team after the mass shooting in Las Vegas, Nevada, bringing to the forefront the need for continuous planning, coordination, and training in the medicolegal death investigation field as well as the need to aggressively address wellness/mental health in Coroner/Medical Examiner Offices.



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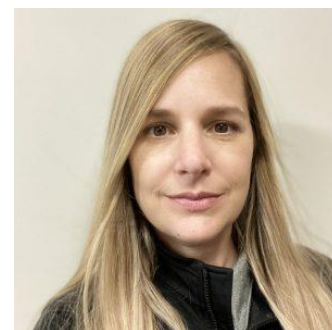
About the Presenter: Dr. Laura Knight is a board-certified forensic pathologist and the Chief Medical Examiner and Coroner at the Washoe County Regional Medical Examiner’s Office in Reno, NV, serving 20 counties in Nevada and California. Dr. Knight holds dual appointments at the rank of Associate Professor in the departments of Pathology and Pediatrics at the University of Nevada-Reno School of Medicine. She earned her M.D. from the University of Louisville School of Medicine, completed residency training in anatomic and clinical pathology at the Medical University of South Carolina, and completed a fellowship in forensic pathology at the Office of the Medical Investigator at the University of New Mexico.



About the Presenter: Dr. Sarah Thomas is an associate medical examiner for the district 21 Medical Examiner’s Office in Fort Myers, Florida, whose employment began weeks before Hurricane Ian. She recently completed a fellowship in cardiovascular pathology at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. She is currently boarded in Anatomic, Clinical and Forensic Pathology. Her academic interests encircle the vast field of autopsy pathology, with a particular focus on cardio pathology and congenital heart disease from child to adult, neuropathology, and infectious disease. She strongly values resident and medical student education and has published several articles and book chapters on various topics within the fields of pathology and microbiology.



About the Presenter: Erin Worrell has 16 years of experience working as a Medicolegal Death Investigator. She is currently the Chief of Investigations at the Denver Office of the Medical Examiner in Denver, Colorado where she has worked since 2019. Prior to the Denver Office, she worked as a Medicolegal Death Investigator supervisor at the Cuyahoga County Medical Examiner’s Office in Cleveland, Ohio. In 2013, Erin Worrell became a registered Diplomate with the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigation. She is currently a member of the Society of Forensic Toxicologists (SOFT), the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS), the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IAC&ME) and has presented multiple times with each organization.



About the Presenter: Kelly Keyes is a board-certified medicolegal death investigator and is currently a research forensic scientist in the Center for Forensic Sciences at RTI International. This follows over 24 years at work in a large sheriff’s coroner’s office in California, primarily as a death investigator. Keyes spent much of her career as a supervising investigator, performing and overseeing over 10,000 death investigations and certifying thousands of death certificates over her career. She has investigated and supervised death investigations of all types. Keyes is the president-elect for the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners, an affiliate member of the National Association of Medical Examiners, a member of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, and chair of the MDI subcommittee of the National Institute of Standards and Technology Organization of Scientific Area Committees.



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