

## OVERVIEW OF FORENSIC PATHOLOGY AND DEATH INVESTIGATION

**Forensic medicine** - The word *forensic* comes from the Latin *forēnsis*, meaning "before the forum". Now synonymous to legal or law and therefore Forensic Medicine can be termed LEGAL MEDICINE or practice of medicine in relation the law (usually the criminal justice system).

**Forensic Medicine** simply put, encompasses the following;

- Medical Jurisprudence: Law relating to medical practice – the acts, certification, continuous medical education (CME), drug prescription, ethics, human rights etc.
- Clinical Forensic Medicine: Deals with examination (and treatment) of the living patient for the purpose of the law – sexual assaults, non-fatal accidents, industrial diseases, injuries, drunks, sanity (psychiatry), paternity (DNA), poisoning (toxicology), patients in custody etc.
- Forensic Pathology - medico-legal pathology i.e. pathology practice in relation to the law.
- **Forensic Pathology** – A sub-specialty of Pathology and branch of Forensic Medicine that focuses on determination of cause of death for the purposes of the law (forensic). The main process in determining the cause of death is called an **Autopsy**.

**Autopsy** also called **Necropsy** or **Post-mortem** is the medical investigation of death derived from the Greek word *autopsia* "to see for oneself", *autos* – oneself and *opsis* - eye. In medico-legal cases, autopsy not only determines the cause of death but pays attention to the manner of death i.e. the circumstances surrounding the death evaluation of any disease or injury that may be present at time of death. Autopsy is usually performed by a pathologist (specialist medical doctor/consultant) or any medically qualified doctor according to the law of the area of jurisprudence (Coroners Ordinance in some states in Nigeria and The Coroners Act in the UK).

Death investigation (Forensic pathology) is guided by law in Nigeria and fashioned mainly along the British Coroners' Act. The Coroners Ordinance enacted in 1945 in Lagos was used in many states in Nigeria and has gone through various reviews culminating into arguably the most comprehensive modification – The Lagos State Coroners' System Law of 2007. The Coroners are judges, magistrates or local authority designated by law to inquire into all suspicious deaths, who in turn can order any qualified medical doctor (medical examiner - pathologist) to perform an autopsy.

The Coroner's system aims to classify deaths according to the following major categories;

- NATURAL (known to medical sciences)
- UNNATURAL
  - Suicide – killing of oneself
  - Homicide – killing of one person by another (murder and manslaughter)
  - Accidental – death by accident or misadventure

In real life, the cause of death may be undetermined i.e. no anatomic cause of death is established unlike TV series like *CSI*, *Dr G: Medical Examiner* where the ‘superhero’ doctor is the investigating police officer, crime scene investigator and pathologist at the same time who perfectly reconstructs the crime/murder all the time.

The autopsy also includes the following in determining the cause of death;

- Collection of trace evidence for analysis
- Examination of wounds/injuries
- Collection and examination of fluids and tissues under the microscope (cytology and histology).
- Involvement of other **Forensic Experts** – Investigating Police Officer (IPO), Radiologist, DNA experts, Archeologist, Anthropologist, Ballistician, Odontologist, Entomologist, Fingerprint analyst, Toxicologist etc

People often wonder why an autopsy should be done? – The reason is to determine as accurately as possible the cause of death which provides the following benefits;

- Accurate disease statistics (vital statistics)
- Medical audit – new diseases, assessment of new techniques or drugs
- Evaluate any disease or injury that may be present
- Insurance purposes
- Identification (identify the deceased)
- Closure for families
- **Solving crime and therefore aid the criminal justice system – exonerate or implicate a suspect.**

It is worthy to note that all citizens belong to the state and therefore the state is interested in the circumstances surrounding their death mainly for the following reason;

1. To prevent secret homicide
2. To assist the state in preventing accidental deaths
3. To facilitate accurate registration of cause of death

Sometime a more comprehensive enquiry called **an inquest** is conducted and seeks to understated these vital questions;

- Who died? - Identity of the deceased
- Where and when did he die? - Place, Time and Date of death
- How did he die? and what killed the deceased - Manner and Cause of death

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