

The State Medical Examiner's public health commitment

The October 12 *Des Moines Register* article “**Iowa Medical Examiner's Office at Risk of Losing Accreditation**” reported that a lack of funding is the underlying reason for the autopsy backlog at the Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner (IOSME). The Iowa Association of County Medical Examiners endorses the proposal to raise necessary funds by increasing fees paid by counties for medical examiner services. This will allow hiring of an additional forensic pathologist to fully staff the IOSME, reduce the backlog of autopsies and ensure the IOSME is able to fulfill its commitment to the public health.

However, in the long-term the Iowa Legislature must find a more equitable way to fund the IOSME, utilizing general tax funds rather than county fees that rely on property taxes. The frustration of families and funeral directors was well described in the *Register* article. IOSME forensic pathologists are also frustrated by the current situation because they know that equitable funding of the State Medical Examiner's Office serves the best interests of all Iowans.

Based on 30 years of experience as a county medical examiner, I see no evidence that Iowa's county medical examiners make unnecessary requests for autopsies. Many cases that we investigate do not require an autopsy, and death is certified through other means. Iowa law mandates that an autopsy be performed in very specific circumstances.

Only three community pathology groups in Iowa provide medical examiner autopsy services. Because fewer community pathologists are available or willing to perform complex forensic autopsies, more cases are referred to the IOSME. Sadly, Iowa is not immune from national trends, and we are seeing significant increases in violent deaths. I believe that more cases will be referred to the IOSME in the future.

The fee increase to counties is a necessary temporary measure to fully fund the IOSME and fulfill the IOSME's public health mission. However, we must find a long term solution to stable funding in the future.

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