

IOWA OFFICE OF THE STATE MEDICAL EXAMINER



General Information

Who Are We and What Do We Do?

The Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner (IOSME) is a bureau within the Iowa Department of Public Health. The Bureau Chief is the State Medical Examiner, who is appointed and serves at the pleasure of the Director of the Iowa Department of Public Health upon the advice of and in consultation with the Director of Public Safety and the Governor of Iowa per Iowa Code 691.5.

The mission of the Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner is to establish credibility in death investigation in a system that will operate efficiently and serve the needs of the citizens of Iowa.

The Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner is committed to fulfilling its role of providing support, guidance, education, consultation, and training to County Medical Examiners and their Death Investigators, who are responsible for investigating violent, suspicious, and unexpected natural deaths that occur throughout the state.

Why the Need for a State Medical Examiner's Office?

The Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner (IOSME) provides guidance and support to the County Medical Examiners who must investigate any and all violent, suspicious, and unexpected natural deaths that occur within their jurisdictions. The IOSME provides forensic autopsy, investigative, and consultative services when requested to do so by County Medical Examiner personnel and law enforcement agencies. The ultimate goal of the forensic investigation and autopsy is to develop logical, scientific, and unbiased information necessary to determine the cause and manner of death for proper and accurate completion of the death certificate. The autopsy report, evidence collected, and court testimony provided are critical to both civil court and murder trials.

Medical Examiners are also responsible for issuing all cremation permits throughout the state of Iowa. Cremation permits are legal documents authorizing funeral homes and crematories to cremate human remains following a medicolegal investigation of the decedent's medical history and circumstances surrounding death.

When and Where Do We Function?

The IOSME staff is available to perform forensic autopsies and assist with medicolegal death investigations 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year.

As of March 2005, we are functioning in our newly-constructed, state-of-the-art medical examiner facility located on the Des Moines Area Community College campus in Ankeny, Iowa.

What Type of Deaths Fall Under the Medical Examiner's Jurisdiction?

Deaths that have an impact on the "public's interest" are routinely investigated by the County Medical Examiners under the guidance of the Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner. Deaths affecting the public's interest include deaths that are sudden, unexpected, violent, suspicious, or unattended. Deaths that come under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner's Office are outlined in Iowa Code section 331.802(3) and generally include:

- 1) Violent deaths, which include homicide, suicide, or accidental death resulting from physical, mechanical, thermal, electrical, or radiation injury;
- 2) Deaths related to disease thought to be virulent or contagious that may constitute a public health hazard;
- 3) Persons under the age of 55 years who die suddenly when in apparent good health;
- 4) Suspicious circumstances;
- 5) Unknown or obscure causes;
- 6) Unclaimed/unidentified bodies;
- 7) Custody deaths.

What Does Cause of Death Mean?

Cause of Death is defined as "the disease or injury that sets in motion the chain of events that ultimately results in the death of an individual." Examples of causes of death include:

- Arteriosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease
- Gunshot Wound of Chest
- Lung Cancer
- Multiple Blunt Force Injuries

What Does Manner of Death Mean?

Manners of Death are classified into the following five categories according to the Iowa and National Death Certificates:

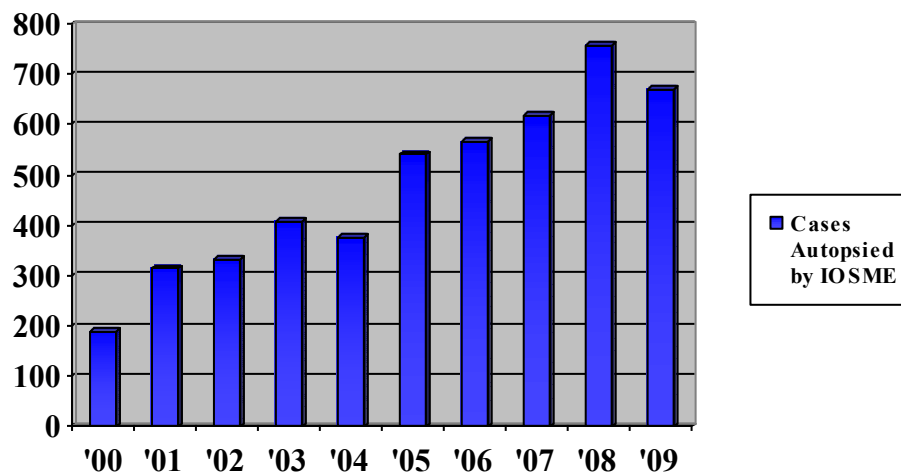
- Accident
- Suicide
- Homicide
- Natural
- Undetermined

Manner of Death is determined by the circumstances surrounding the death.

What is a Death Certificate?

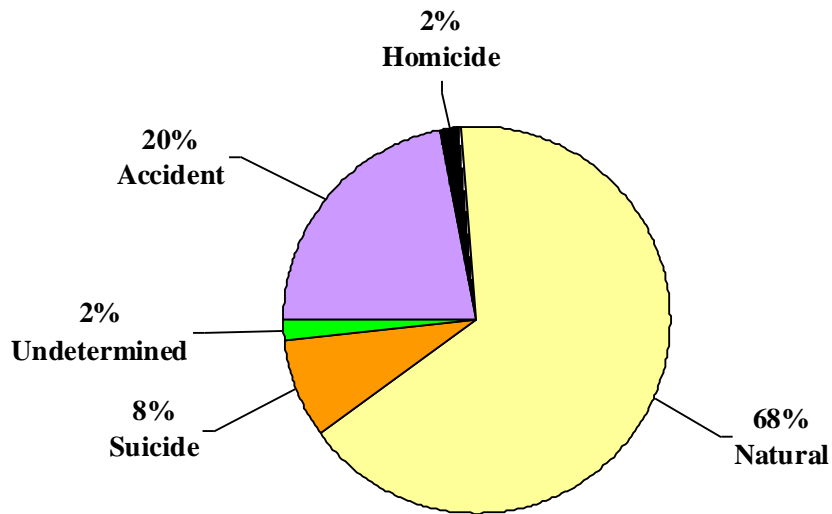
The death certificate is an official, legal document and vital record, which is signed by a licensed physician or other designated authority, and it includes the decedent's demographic data and states the cause and manner of death. The death certificate provides proof that the death actually occurred. It is necessary to settle the estates of the deceased and provides information to public health agencies at the local, state, and federal levels needed to track statistical trends in health. These statistics are used to alert government health agencies of rising trends in natural and infectious diseases, risky behaviors, and unsafe equipment and vehicles, which contribute to deaths. Although the IOSME physicians may certify the cause and manner of death and sign death certificates, copies of the death certificate must be obtained from the Iowa Department of Public Health Office of Vital Records at 515-281-4944. *Our office cannot issue copies of death certificates.*

How many and what types of deaths are autopsied by the State Medical Examiner?



Number of cases referred to IOSME and autopsied in the year:

2000	189	2004	377	2008	757
2001	314	2005	541	2009	670
2002	332	2006	567		
2003	409	2007	618		



Average percentage of cases (grouped by manner of death) reported statewide to the Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner, years 2000 through 2009.

The Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner

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