



JOINT STATEMENT OF
THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF CORONERS AND MEDICAL EXAMINERS

and
THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF MEDICAL
EXAMINERS



COVID-19 Vaccine: Prioritization of Medicolegal Death Investigation Professionals

Medical Examiners, Coroners, and associated death investigation personnel often work behind the scenes but are very much on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their important work places them at risk of infection to many infectious agents, including COVID-19.

Two primary categories of medicolegal death investigation personnel must be prioritized during COVID-19 vaccine distribution: Forensic Pathologists (and their assistants) who interact with the deceased during autopsy; and those Medicolegal Death Investigators (MDIs) who interact with the body of the deceased, families, and death scenes.

Forensic Pathologists and their assistants experience direct and prolonged exposure to potentially infectious material during the autopsy. Our country is already experiencing a significant shortage of Forensic Pathologists with only approximately 500 board-certified, full-time forensic pathologists currently in practice. In many jurisdictions, Forensic Pathologists were struggling to manage their baseline workloads long before this pandemic. We must ensure the safety of Forensic Pathologists while they gather critical public health information in COVID-19 cases and simultaneously manage all manner of other deaths that were already straining the systems before the pandemic.

MDIs (representing Medical Examiners and Coroners) are exposed to COVID-19 risk in a number of ways beyond the autopsy suite. In addition to direct contact with the bodies of the deceased, MDIs also interact with exposed and infected family members during the course of their investigations. Furthermore, the important work of MDIs takes them into homes and hospitals occupied by COVID-19 patients. A majority of death investigations are handled at the county level with inadequate budgets and minimal staffing, yet MDIs are involved in all cases autopsied by a Forensic Pathologist and an even greater number of deaths that are not autopsied.

In the event of a workplace outbreak involving Forensic Pathologists or Medical Examiner/Coroner death investigators, the impact could be devastating on the critical public health, criminal justice, and community care-taking functions of our nation's death investigation systems. While others may reduce their responses due to fear of exposure, we do not have that luxury. We have both a legal and moral obligation to respond and continue this important and hazardous work.

Forensic Pathologists, their autopsy assistants, coroners and the medicolegal death investigators representing Medical Examiners and Coroners across the country must be considered a priority for the COVID-19 vaccine.