

# Medical Examiners: Deciphering the Code of Death

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A female medical examiner observes the body of a deceased. (Zip Recruiter)

Imagine staring at a dead body for 5 or 6 hours with your full attention. Your brain races, forcing you to observe, analyze and question any suspicious point. Sometimes, you may even have to take out a scalpel to carefully cut their skin. Or, attempt to conjure the cause of death and undo the crime scene in your mind. Would you be willing to do this kind of work as your occupation?

Most of our time is spent with living people: we communicate, work, and develop relationships with others that makes life vivid and colorful. Conversely, if we spend most of our day dealing with dead people, life may roll like a black and white film, somber and icy.

However, 2,040 people worldwide and nearly 500 people in the United States chose this life and occupation, according to The National Commission on Forensic Science. Their occupation is so unusual that it would be intimidating for ordinary people. This occupation is called medical examiner.

"When I wake up in the morning, I have no idea what's waiting for me at the morgue. If I hear a story on the radio, I'll wonder if I'm destined to get intertwined in it," said Dr. Allen Mock, a chief medical examiner from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in West Virginia. Dr. Mock likes "having challenges" and being like "a medical detective." He feels "very accomplished" when "identify[ing] a decedent based upon dental records, medical history, and circumstances" and "get[s] a good feeling when I can give a family even a little bit of closure."

But for Dr. Donald Pojman, a deputy chief medical examiner from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in West Virginia, being a medical examiner was not his first choice. He said that it was not until experiencing a series of unexpected turning points that let him passively discover and "acquire" his "love" for "forensic pathology." Due to problems like medical specialties replacing general practice (does not specialize in a particular type of medicine) and difficulty of developing long-term relationships with patients, Dr. Pojman changed his mind from being an emergency physician, a family doctor, a pediatrician, a general internist, to finally becoming a medical examiner.

Regardless of their motivation for becoming a medical examiner, this career "is not something a lot of people are comfortable doing," said Dr. Todd Grey, Utah's chief medical examiner, according to CBS News. A phone call will make medical examiners rush to the crime scene without hesitation. In their eyes, there is never a distinction between day and night. They dare not expect having weekends, vacations, or leisurely meals, and their phone is always on 24/7.

Dr. Mock reflected on the hardships of being a medical examiner: "days can be long, on-call duties can become arduous, and you can never really be 'caught up'." However, he also said that he and his colleagues were able to find some hobbies they enjoy doing in their free time, such as "fine furniture building."

On the other side, Dr. Pojman complained about the excess workload and stress due to a shortage of qualified forensic pathologists. He said that he and his colleagues were doing "more cases than recommended by the National Association of Medical Examiners." This "not only requires [him] to work at home during the evening and weekends, but causes undue stress to the deceased's family and [the] support personnel due to the delay in getting death certificates and reports in a timely manner."

Besides being busy, medical examiners lack time with their family. "When my child sees my poster in the sentry box and shouts excitedly 'that's my mother,' he only knows that his mother is a police officer, not a medical examiner," Han Ying said, a Chinese medical examiner, according to Xinhua News Agency. In order to be able to go to the crime scene at night freely, Han had no choice but to let her child sleep with his grandparents. The only time Han was able to be with her young son was when she was not on weekend duty. "I think the time I spent with my child was too little, but I believe he will understand me when he gets older, and he will be proud of having a medical examiner mother."

Medical examiners' irregular working hours led to physical exhaustion and gaps between them and their family, but that's not all: intimidating crime scenes are almost impossible to escape. Suicides, homicides, family murders, and corpse dismemberment cases occur every day in the world, and 120 people die each minute, according to the Bioethics Research Library at Georgetown University. There would be corpses, bloodstains, and weapons lying in unexpected places with a pungent smell. What medical examiners need to do is to find and analyze those clues and compete with invisible opponents and reassure the living.

Nevertheless, some medical examiners regard going to the crime scene as a precious opportunity. To Dr. Pojman, it is useful to "get a lot more information as opposed to getting [it] third hand from somebody else" or digitally.

In addition, being a medical examiner requires a strong mentality. "Every time I see the victim's family, I feel heavy in my heart," said Han, as the medical examiner for a homicide case that happened in August 2015 in Yongqing County, Hebei Province, China.

The cause was a man's dispute with his wife at home. When the emergency medical technicians (EMTs) arrived, his wife no longer had vital signs. The EMTs decided to call the police, but the wife's family members tried to stop them and were unwilling to cooperate when being asked for permission for an autopsy. On one hand, it was harsh to imagine that their daughter's body was being dissected; on the other hand, once the autopsy results confirm that the wife's death was caused by the husband, their children would lose both parents and he would not be available to help his elderly parents.

Knowing the result was going to be harsh and disturbing, Han and her colleagues still repeatedly persuaded the family that led to their consent to the autopsy. The autopsy report showed that the wife died of intracranial hemorrhage due to her husband's violence. In the face of sympathy and law, medical examiners had to choose the latter in order to reveal the truth and defend the rights of the living.

In other cases, medical examiners face complaints from the deceased's family. Dr. Pojman revealed that he has "a large hardcover three-ring binder from one family member with all sorts of documentation of medical records, witness statements, photos, and movies explaining why I was wrong in my interpretation of their loved one's death."

Besides, when Dr. Pojman "was much younger and [his] child was growing up," he found it "very, very difficult" to "work on" "any kids" whose age was similar to his child.

The psychological pressure of medical examiners comes not only from the victims and their families, but also from others' perception of their profession.

Dr. Mock disclosed that "the forensic pathologist is often 'looked down on' by other physicians." But, he also indicates that "the forensic pathologists in the [medical examiner] system are VERY

culturally diverse” and friendly. “For instance, we have doctors from Africa, Turkey, and Poland right now!”

According to NetEase, online users claimed that medical examiners are “doctors who talk to the dead,” that let people become apprehensive of approaching them. “Everyone dares not sit in the same car with us, eat at the same table with us, and live in the same house with us,” said Qin, a Chinese medical examiner. As a consequence, medical examiners feel loneliness. “In life, friends and relatives will keep their distance from you, and you will become lonely. The only thing I can do outside of work every day is sleep,” said Chen, another Chinese medical examiner.

Medical examiner Hwang, however, shared her experience that “When you meet new friends, don’t take the initiative to shake hands, because they may be afraid or dislike it.” The reason Hwang became afraid of making social interactions proactively was because of a breathtaking experience. One time while she was dissecting an AIDS patient’s body, unfortunately, Hwang accidentally pricked her finger with a suture needle that possibly infected her with a virus. This led to her having to take post-exposure prophylaxis for a long time, with regular monthly check-ups and continuous fear for up to a year.

Similarly, Dr. Pojman just tells people that “[he] work[s] with the county or state and work in ‘human resources’,” since telling the truth would only get “one of two reactions: disgust or “Ah, that’s cool! Tell me some interesting stories!”

“It’s a dirty job, and it takes a certain mindset to adopt,” said Dr. Mock.

Not only infectious diseases in the corpses like Dr. Hwang encountered. There are countless more factors that greatly threaten the safety of medical examiners, such as explosives and poisonous gas. The work of medical examiners is extremely challenging and risky, both physically and psychologically.

Although medical examiners do more challenging and risky work than normal doctors, they earn significantly less - an average of about \$185,000 compared with \$335,000, according to CBS News. Dr. Mock summarizes that “in essence, you are sacrificing salary for [more] free time [than a general surgeon].” Moreover, due to the coronavirus pandemic, there was an overflow of bodies that caused a shortage in medical examiners, according to PEW. Low salary and shortage imply the society’s lack of attention and understanding of medical examiners and their work, making them even harder to be respected by the public.

In some film and television dramas, the medical examiner is often the key role in guiding the plot: they use tiny clues from the dead people to restore the crime scene to get to the bottom of the case. In reality, medical examiners are not as cool as they are portrayed on TV: their working hours are not fixed, their working environment is harsh, and they are under psychological pressure brought by the cases and the public’s opinions on them... Just like Dr.

Pojman said, “the job isn't as glamorous as [many] thought [and] the pay is relatively low due to being a government position.”

Nevertheless, most medical examiners stay strong and firm in their position to protect the living and the dead, just like Han said in her interview with Xinhua News Agency: "It's worth it no matter how much I dedicate!"

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P.S. According to Dr. Pojman, if you would like to read more interesting stories about medical examiners, “you could read the case of John Robinson, which you can find in the book ‘Anyone You Can Want Me to Be.’ You can also search the web for my name along with ‘The Wizard of Oz,’” which is a fictional story.

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Written Interview Response from Dr. Allen Mock and Dr. Donald Pojman