

Key Qualities, Manipulations, Negligence and Ethical Challenges in Postmortem Examinations

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Abstract:

The credibility of forensic investigations and the legal system as a whole are seriously threatened by manipulation, negligence, and unethical behaviour during postmortem examinations. Breaking ethical rules can lead to inaccurate conclusions about the cause and manner of death, which compromises the validity of important forensic evidence used in court. Findings may be biased by outside influences from law enforcement, families, or well-known people, impeding the pursuit of justice. Furthermore, incorrect interpretations might arise from procedural errors and missed facts, which can be especially detrimental when forensic evidence is crucial. Falsifying documents is one example of an unethical behaviour that erodes public trust in medico-legal institutions. These challenges are made worse by a lack of funding, poor training, and possible conflicts of interest, all of which compromise the impartiality and thoroughness of postmortem investigations. To tackle these challenges and enhance accountability and integrity in the field of forensic pathology, it is crucial to undertake comprehensive reforms. This includes establishing stricter regulatory frameworks, upgrading infrastructure, boosting human resources, improving videographic documentation, providing enhanced ethical and specialized training, and ensuring more effective resource allocation.

Keywords: Postmortem examination, forensic pathology, autopsy manipulation, negligence in autopsies, unethical practices, conflicts of interest, forensic integrity, medicolegal examination, medicolegal ethics.

1. Introduction:

Manipulations, negligence, and unethical behaviour in postmortem examinations can severely compromise the pursuit of justice and lead to misinformation regarding the cause and manner of death. Autopsies provide crucial evidence in legal and investigative contexts, and any deviation from ethical standards may result in incorrect conclusions that can have serious implications for families, the justice system, and public health.

Firstly, external pressures can distort autopsy results. Forensic pathologists may face influences from police officers, family members, or political factions that might pressure them to alter their findings in sensitive cases. This external influence can lead to biased reports that obscure the true circumstances around a death, negatively impacting criminal investigations and the search for justice.



Another significant issue is negligence during postmortem examinations. This can include procedural errors, inadequate documentation, and failure to follow established protocols. In some cases, pathologists may overlook critical injuries, skip essential tests, or misinterpret evidence because of inattention or lack of experience. Such negligence can lead to incorrect determinations about the cause of death, which is especially detrimental in legal situations where forensic evidence is crucial.

Moreover, unethical practices, such as falsifying reports, also pose serious challenges. Pathologists may deliberately misrepresent or omit critical information to obtain a desired outcome. This not only undermines the integrity of the forensic process but also erodes public trust in medicolegal institutions, raising concerns about the reliability of forensic evidence in court.

In addition, insufficient training and a lack of resources complicate postmortem examinations. Understaffed facilities and overwhelmed forensic experts may struggle to maintain high standards, leading to hasty or incomplete autopsies. Without adequate training or resources, forensic pathologists might not possess the necessary skills or tools for comprehensive examinations, increasing the risk of oversights and misdiagnoses.

Furthermore, conflicts of interest can jeopardize the impartiality of autopsy reports. Pathologists with close connections to law enforcement or other stakeholders may, whether intentionally or inadvertently, skew their findings to meet external expectations. This compromises the objectivity essential to forensic investigations and can hinder accurate conclusions in criminal cases.

The lack of standardized guidelines across various regions and institutions exacerbates these problems. Differences in procedures, documentation practices, and reporting methods can lead to inconsistencies, making it difficult to guarantee accuracy and accountability in forensic examinations. Establishing aligned protocols and implementing strict oversight is crucial for improving the reliability of autopsy practices.

To tackle these challenges, it is essential to develop stronger regulatory frameworks and accountability measures. This could involve conducting regular audits, enhancing ethical training, and promoting transparency in forensic reporting. Such initiatives could help reduce the risks of manipulation and negligence, thereby fostering greater integrity in the postmortem examination process.

In conclusion, manipulations, carelessness, and unethical practices in postmortem examinations pose significant threats to the accuracy and credibility of forensic findings. By prioritizing ethical standards, improving training, and ensuring accountability, the forensic community can strengthen trust in the vital

role that autopsies play within the justice system.

2. Time Required for Conducting Postmortem Examination and Subsequent Delays:

A normal postmortem examination takes two to four hours, though this might vary depending on a number of factors, including the case's complexity, the tests performed, and the volume of documentation needed. While more complex instances, such as homicides or those involving severe trauma, toxicological examinations, or specialized dissections, may take longer, simpler cases, such as those attributable to natural causes, typically take around two hours. The examination procedure may be prolonged by further tests like toxicological or histology as well as thorough documentation, including notes, photos, and in-depth reports, especially in legal circumstances. Even though the average time is between two and four hours, more complicated cases may require significantly more time because of sophisticated forensic or investigation variables.

Histological analysis holds significant importance in situations where the cause of death isn't readily discernible through a traditional autopsy. At times, the autopsy surgeons withhold their final determination of the cause of death until they receive the forensic analysis of the viscera, which can lead to significant delays in submitting the final postmortem report. By examining the quantity of forensic reports concerning viscera that are awaiting processing at various forensic laboratories across multiple states in India, you might discover that the determination of the cause of death is delayed in hundreds of postmortem reports for months because the viscera reports have not been received from the forensic labs.

3. Qualities of a Good Autopsy Surgeon:

To perform comprehensive and reliable examinations, an experienced autopsy surgeon, commonly known as a forensic pathologist, must have a specific set of qualities. First and foremost, they need to demonstrate exceptional attention to detail, rigorously examining tissues, organs, and evidence to reveal critical information that might not be readily apparent. A solid foundation in medical knowledge is essential, requiring an in-depth understanding of human anatomy, diseases, and various death causes.

Furthermore, strong analytical abilities are vital for interpreting complex data and drawing sound conclusions based on the findings. Effective communication skills are also crucial for presenting results clearly and accurately in both courtroom settings and written documentation. The autopsy surgeon must maintain a high level of professionalism and ethics, ensuring that their work respects the dignity of the deceased while adhering to legal and moral standards.

Additionally, dealing with death and its consequences can be immensely challenging, necessitating considerable emotional resilience. Lastly, a skilled autopsy surgeon should foster a spirit of collaboration, working effectively with police, attorneys, and other medical professionals to provide thorough insights that support investigations and legal proceedings. Collectively, these attributes guarantee a careful, respectful, and scientifically rigorous autopsy process.

4. Postmortem after Sunset:

To ensure the examination's accuracy, safety, and reliability, several important precautions must be observed when conducting an autopsy at night. Having modern mortuary facilities equipped with adequate lighting is crucial for maintaining visibility and precision throughout the procedure. Furthermore, it is vital to have all necessary medical instruments readily available to effectively carry out the autopsy.

The involvement of trained personnel and certified forensic pathologists is particularly important during

nighttime examinations, as they help ensure adherence to established standards. Beyond professional expertise, it's also necessary to minimize the risk of infection and contamination. This entails the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), maintaining a clean environment, and providing sufficient ventilation to safeguard all individuals involved.

Additionally, secure access to case files, historical information, and forensic resources is crucial, particularly in high-profile cases where security is paramount. Autopsies conducted outside regular hours may require legal or medical permissions, especially in serious situations like rape with murder, homicides or unnatural deaths. Meeting these requirements is essential for maintaining the integrity of forensic investigations carried out at night and ensuring adherence to professional standards.

5. Vulnerabilities of Postmortem Reports:

1. **Coercion to Alter Death Conclusions:** Forensic pathologists may encounter undue influence from various entities in high-stakes situations. This pressure can lead them to modify a cause of death to suit the interests of law enforcement, political figures, or powerful families. For instance, reclassifying a homicide as an accidental death could potentially shield a suspect from legal consequences. Such alterations undermine the reliability of the autopsy and obstruct justice for the deceased individuals.
2. **Neglecting Crucial Evidence:** Carelessness during autopsies can result in the dismissal of vital evidence or injuries that indicate foul play. For example, failing to identify strangulation signs such as ligature marks or unique bruising could improperly lead to a conclusion of natural causes. Such negligence can culminate in wrongful interpretations that sabotage legal investigations and deny justice to victims and their families.
3. **Manipulating Toxicology Findings:** There are instances where pathologists might alter toxicology reports to obscure substance abuse or potential poisoning. In situations where an influential individual could be implicated, a pathologist might intentionally report negative findings. These deceptive practices not only breach ethical codes but also violate the law, as they disrupt the integrity of legal proceedings and public health information.
4. **Misrepresentation of Autopsy Documentation:** Ethical breaches can occur through the manipulation of autopsy photographs. For example, in cases involving police custody, specific injuries might be intentionally left out or minimized in photographic evidence to avoid implicating law enforcement. This selective portrayal obscures the reality of the deceased's injuries, undermining the transparency essential in forensic analyses.
5. **Insufficient External Assessment:** A thorough external examination is crucial to avoid missing significant clues, especially in cases of blunt trauma. A hasty evaluation might overlook essential indicators, such as hidden fractures or bruises, and falsely conclude a natural death. Skipping this critical step tarnishes the validity of the autopsy findings and can cover up signs of potential abuse or misconduct.
6. **Impartiality Compromised by Conflicts of Interest:** Conflicts of interest can arise when pathologists have personal ties to law enforcement or legal representatives. If the pathologist's friends or colleagues are involved in the case, their findings might be skewed to align with the narrative provided by law enforcement, regardless of contrary evidence. Such bias diminishes the objectivity necessary for trustworthy forensic assessments.
7. **Inconsistent Adherence to Established Protocols:** Some pathologists may overlook standard operating procedures during autopsies, omitting vital actions like organ dissection or thorough toxicological

evaluations. An example includes diagnosing a heart attack without a comprehensive examination of the heart itself. This negligence not only jeopardizes autopsy accuracy but also undermines the reputation of forensic investigations.

8. **Distorting Medical Histories:** Pathologists sometimes present inaccurate or misleading details about a deceased person's medical background to legitimize a preferred cause of death. For instance, recording a fictitious history of epilepsy to justify a seizure-related death represents deliberate manipulation. Such misrepresentation can distort the medical and legal implications surrounding a case, thereby threatening justice.
9. **Influence of Personal Prejudice:** Personal biases may taint the results of postmortem examinations if pathologists permit their values or preconceived notions to skew their assessments. For instance, a pathologist biased against drug users might trivialize suspicious factors in an overdose scenario, hastily concluding it was an accident. This bias can obstruct an objective evaluation of the case and perpetuate injustices, particularly among marginalized communities.
10. **Failure in Comprehensive Documentation:** Accurate and complete record-keeping is vital in postmortem examinations, yet negligence often leads to incomplete or missing documentation. Omitting key details regarding internal injuries or organ conditions can hinder thorough reviews by other professionals. Such incomplete records jeopardize legal procedures and prevent families from fully comprehending the events surrounding their loved one's death.

In conclusion, the presence of manipulations, negligence, and unethical activities within postmortem examinations fundamentally undermines the justice system and public confidence. These examples emphasize the importance of strong oversight, adherence to rigorous protocols, and robust ethical training for forensic pathologists to promote fair and precise determinations of death causes.

6. Problems Faced by Autopsy Surgeons in Conducting Postmortem Examination:

Autopsy surgeons face a plethora of significant challenges that critically impede the efficacy of postmortem examinations. One of the primary obstacles is the lack of adequate infrastructure and outdated equipment prevalent in many medical facilities. This deficiency severely restricts the precision and overall quality of the findings during autopsies. When the necessary tools and technology are not available, autopsy surgeons struggle to obtain accurate data, which is vital for achieving justice and understanding the causes of death. As a result, the outcomes of these examinations may not just fall short of expectations but can also lead to misinterpretations that have serious implications for legal proceedings.

The situation is further complicated by a shortage of trained forensic pathologists in the country. With a limited number of specialists available, it is often general physicians, who typically have minimal forensic expertise, that are called upon to perform autopsies. This can lead to an increased risk of overlooking critical evidence or misinterpreting the findings, thereby undermining the integrity of the postmortem process. Such a reliance on inadequately trained personnel not only diminishes the quality of the examinations but also raises questions about the validity of the conclusions drawn from these standardized processes, affecting both families seeking closure and the justice system.

Moreover, the demands placed on autopsy surgeons are exacerbated by high caseloads, which create immense pressure on these medical professionals. The overwhelming volume of cases can lead to physical and mental fatigue, contributing to a risk of burnout. When autopsy surgeons are stretched too thin, the accuracy and thoroughness of their work inevitably suffer. This strain not only impacts the health and well-being of the surgeons but also has far-reaching consequences for the integrity of forensic

examinations. The ability to perform detailed and meticulous analyses is compromised when professionals are burdened with excessive workloads.

In addition to these workforce-related issues, the working conditions in many morgues can be quite unsanitary and lacking proper ventilation, posing additional health risks to autopsy surgeons and their supporting staff. Legal and procedural constraints, along with bureaucratic delays, only serve to complicate the autopsy process further. In particular, external pressures from vested interests can unduly influence the findings in high-profile cases.

There are also practical challenges, such as delays in body transport, which can worsen the state of decomposition and hinder examinations. Compounding these difficulties is the limited access to ongoing training opportunities, which stymies skill development in modern forensic techniques. Addressing these multifaceted issues through targeted investments in infrastructure, professional development initiatives, and necessary legal reforms is critical to enhancing the reliability and integrity of autopsy examinations across India.

7. Literature Review on Vulnerabilities of Postmortem Reports:

Because they offer important details regarding the cause and manner of death, postmortem examinations are essential to the forensic investigative process. However, a number of flaws in postmortem reports may compromise the reliability and integrity of forensic results. The purpose of this literature review is to examine common postmortem report weaknesses, including manipulation, carelessness, and ethical quandaries, as well as their consequences for justice and public trust in the medico-legal system.

External pressures might cause forensic pathologists to change their conclusions, which is one of the most serious weaknesses in postmortem reports. According to research by Hanzlick (2008), forensic pathologists may be pressured by law enforcement, relatives, or other powerful parties to change their findings in order to fit particular narratives. For instance, officials may misclassify deaths in high-profile cases out of fear of public attention or possible legal repercussions. For instance, they may record a homicide as an accidental death in order to shield the perpetrators from criminal responsibility. Such changes compromise the validity of autopsy findings and impede the search for justice, particularly in criminal cases.

Another serious flaw that affects the calibre of the reports is negligence during postmortem inspections. Inaccurate cause-of-death judgments can arise from procedural errors, such as neglecting to record vital evidence, ignoring significant injuries, or not adhering to established standards. High caseloads, poor training, and a lack of resources for forensic pathologists are common causes of carelessness, according to Kuo et al. (2018). A lack of attention to detail might result in the rejection of important evidence, especially in suspicious circumstances where thorough investigations are necessary. These errors may lead to incorrect interpretations, depriving victims and their families of justice in the end.

The credibility of postmortem exams is seriously damaged by unethical behaviour, such as fabricating autopsy reports. According to research by Burch et al. (2019), some pathologists may purposefully falsify or distort results in order to get the desired results. For example, they may minimize the severity of injuries or leave out important information. In addition to endangering the integrity of the forensic process, this unethical behaviour erodes public confidence in the medicolegal system. Furthermore, falsified narratives regarding the circumstances of the death and the actual extent of the deceased's injuries can be produced by manipulating documents, including autopsy photos.

The vulnerabilities linked to postmortem reports are further aggravated by the problems of insufficient

training and scarce resources. According to research by Bansal et al. (2020), for example, many autopsy surgeons in India may not have access to appropriate training programs and continuing education, which leaves them with a staff that might not be entirely equipped to handle difficult situations. Furthermore, the lack of contemporary tools and technology in many forensic labs degrades the quality of investigations, resulting in missed evidence or insufficient analyses. According to the authors, closing these gaps is essential to enhancing the validity of autopsy results and guaranteeing justice in medicolegal situations. Another major obstacle to preserving objectivity in postmortem assessments is conflicts of interest. Pathologists may come into circumstances in which their impartiality is compromised by their personal ties to law enforcement or legal authorities. According to research by Reddy et al. (2021), pathologists' neutrality may be compromised when they have close relationships to the people involved in a case, which could lead to manipulated conclusions that conform to external expectations. This lack of impartiality compromises the fundamental objectivity needed in forensic investigations and may have serious consequences for the results of legal proceedings.

The vulnerabilities of postmortem reports are increased by the absence of uniform recording methods and processes across different institutions and geographical areas. This discrepancy can lead to variations in the way autopsies are carried out, recorded, and reported, which makes it challenging to ensure precision and responsibility in forensic investigations. A comprehensive review by Tzeng et al. (2017) found that inconsistent autopsy procedures can result in inconsistent results, making it more difficult to accurately determine the cause of death. Improving the quality of forensic investigations and the dependability of autopsy results require the implementation of strong oversight procedures and uniform norms.

The justice system and public confidence in medicolegal institutions are significantly impacted by the flaws in postmortem findings. False conclusions brought about by deceit, carelessness, or unethical behaviour may lead to erroneous convictions, inadequate inquiries, and a failure to provide victims and their families with justice. Furthermore, there may be a significant decline in public trust in the credibility of forensic evidence, which could result in doubts about the medicolegal system as a whole. According to studies, the public's willingness to cooperate with law enforcement and participate in judicial procedures may suffer when they believe that forensic practices have been compromised (Meyer et al., 2018).

The justice system and the public's trust in medicolegal institutions are significantly impacted by the weaknesses found in postmortem reports. Inadequate investigations, erroneous convictions, and a failure to provide victims and their families justice can all be consequences of misleading results brought on by manipulation, carelessness, or unethical behaviour. Additionally, the public's confidence in the validity of forensic evidence may be severely damaged, leading to doubt about the dependability of the medicolegal system as a whole. According to research, the public's willingness to cooperate with law enforcement and participate in judicial proceedings may suffer when they believe that forensic methods have been compromised (Meyer et al., 2018).

Some adjustments are necessary to overcome the vulnerabilities associated with postmortem reports. Forensic pathologists must adhere to ethical norms and best practices, which requires the establishment of stronger regulatory frameworks and accountability systems. A culture of honesty in forensic pathology can be fostered by conducting routine audits of autopsy processes and providing better ethical training. Along with improved resource allocation, forensic pathologists' professional development and training can also significantly raise the standard of postmortem exams and boost public confidence in the medicolegal system.

Despite being crucial to the forensic investigation process, postmortem reports can include problems such

as coercion, negligence, unethical behaviour, insufficient training, and inconsistent methodologies that compromise their credibility. We must collaborate to strengthen ethical training, implement legislative changes, and provide forensic pathologists with the tools they require in order to solve these shortcomings. By preserving the integrity of postmortem exams, the medico-legal community may safeguard justice principles and maintain public confidence in the forensic process.

8. Factors That Courts Consider in Evaluating the Credibility of a Postmortem Report:

When evaluating the credibility of a postmortem report, it is essential for courts to take into account the qualifications and impartiality of the medical examiner responsible for conducting the autopsy. A report from a qualified forensic pathologist with relevant expertise enhances the credibility of the findings, as such specialists adhere to standardized procedures and protocols. Courts should verify the examiner's credentials, training, and experience, as well as any potential biases or conflicts of interest that might compromise the neutrality of their findings. Reports generated by independent or neutral examiners, who are free from external influences, typically carry greater weight in judicial proceedings, as they reduce the risk of bias from involved parties.

The examination's methodology and thoroughness are also crucial in assessing credibility. Courts should ensure that the autopsy was performed in accordance with accepted forensic standards and that there is comprehensive documentation of all observations, injuries, and potential causes of death. Detailed videographic and photographic evidence, tissue sampling, toxicology screenings, and microscopic examinations contribute to the report's credibility by providing objective data that can be subjected to cross-examination. In contrast, inconsistent or incomplete procedural practices diminish the reliability of the findings. A meticulous and systematic postmortem report allows the court to connect the examiner's conclusions directly to the evidence observed during the autopsy, fostering transparency and rigor in the analysis.

Lastly, the consistency of the postmortem report's findings with other evidence in the case serves as a significant factor. Courts should evaluate how the report's conclusions align with witness testimonies, findings from the crime scene, and any pertinent circumstantial evidence. A credible postmortem report will logically correlate with other aspects of the case, providing insight into the cause and manner of death while either supporting or contradicting various theories. Discrepancies between postmortem findings and other evidence can raise questions that may necessitate additional investigation or expert testimony. By examining the examiner's qualifications, the thoroughness of the methodology, and the coherence with other evidence, courts can more accurately assess the credibility of a postmortem report.

9. Court Judgments:

- The Supreme Court of India has determined that postmortem reports are essential documents in criminal investigations, especially in cases of unnatural death, as they help ascertain the cause, timing, and manner of death. However, such reports are viewed as expert testimony rather than conclusive evidence on their own. In the case of *State of Haryana v. Bhagirath* (1999), the Court asserted that the conclusions drawn from a postmortem report must be supported by corroborative evidence. Additionally, the Court noted that minor discrepancies should not undermine the overall credibility of the report if its general findings are credible, and emphasized the importance of thoroughly examining any variances or mistakes.

- In *Ram Narain v. State of Punjab* (1975), the Court highlighted that while a postmortem report can assist in identifying the cause and time of death, it cannot solely establish criminal liability. Rather, it must be used alongside other evidence to substantiate charges beyond a reasonable doubt.

10. Conclusion:

Significant obstacles that jeopardize forensic investigations and medicolegal outcomes confront autopsy practitioners. Poor lighting, obsolete infrastructure, and insufficient equipment all have an impact on how accurate exams are. Fatigue brought on by excessive workloads and a lack of skilled pathologists also degrades the quality of the exams. Timely conclusions are further hampered by delays in obtaining patient histories, medical records, samples and viscera reports; also, surgeons are at risk for biohazards because of inadequate sanitation and a lack of personal protective equipment. Objective reporting is made more difficult by social, moral, and political constraints, especially in high-profile situations. Furthermore, skill development is hampered by a lack of training opportunities and specialisation. These problems highlight how urgently forensic services staffing, resources, and safety need to be improved.

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