

Forensic Pathology shortage affects Montana

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States' Shortage of Forensic Pathologists Delays Autopsies

Nation faces scant supply of medical examiners,
particularly in rural areas



Walter Kemp resigned as Montana state medical examiner in July. For a time, the state had no one to conduct autopsies. *PHOTO: DAN KOECK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

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When a 58-year-old man collapsed and died at a convenience store in eastern Montana in August, his corpse had to be driven 300 miles to neighboring South Dakota for an autopsy.

The reason: There was no one in Montana to examine the body, a situation that highlights the nation's scant supply of forensic pathologists, particularly in rural areas.

“You just drive like crazy,” said Terry Bullis, coroner for Montana’s Big Horn County, noting the trip and autopsy took five days. “Any time you have an unembalmed body, deterioration can begin—the quicker you can get things done, the better it is for the family.”

No one was available in Montana because the state’s chief medical examiner left July 1, and a contractor had his position effectively eliminated amid questions over his work. The contractor had been the only forensic pathologist in the eastern half of the state.

There are about 500 practicing board-certified forensic pathologists in the U.S., less than half the amount needed, based on the number of autopsies that have to be done, according to the National Commission on Forensic Science. The longstanding problem has persisted as the number of new professionals barely keeps pace with retirements.

“There is a shortage,” said David Fowler, vice president of the National Association of Medical Examiners. “It’s not glamorous, it’s not attractive and it doesn’t pay much.”

The commission, formed by the U.S. Justice Department in 2013 to improve the state of forensic sciences, approved recommendations in August to increase the number of forensic pathologists, including raising salaries, introducing student-loan forgiveness, and increasing exposure to the profession in medical schools.

The prospect of taking on medical-school debt to get a job that pays less than similar positions elsewhere isn’t a big draw. Pathologists who work for hospitals and other private institutions make an average of \$335,000 a year against \$185,000 for medical examiners, the commission says.

Training programs for forensic pathologists are undersubscribed, and the number getting board-certified each year has remained roughly between 20 and 40 over the last 10 years, according to the American Board of Pathology, far below the number needed to make a significant dent in the shortage. The average age in the field is 55.

The shortage has contributed to backlogs. The understaffed Massachusetts medical examiner’s office didn’t complete more than 40% of its autopsy reports in fiscal 2014, causing potential delays in court cases and insurance claims by families.

Even though the state provided funding to hire more medical examiners, the office couldn’t find any, in part because of “the limited number of forensic pathologists nationwide,” Henry Nields, chief medical examiner, told legislators earlier this year.

In some rural areas, the nearest forensic pathologist could be as far away as the next state, as has been the case in Wyoming for years, adding costs and delays. Edward McAuslan, a retired coroner, said bodies from Fremont County, where he presided, were sent to Colorado.

The shortage also means that some autopsies are performed by people who aren't forensic pathologists at all, said John Fudenberg, Clark County Coroner in Nevada and former president of the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners.

"You wouldn't go to a family practice doctor to get heart surgery," said Mr. Fudenberg.

Montana has begun to fill its void by hiring a new state medical examiner and a deputy, and has plans to hire one more deputy. The state medical examiner's salary was raised by \$55,000 to \$236,000 to attract a candidate.

"For the first time ever, Montana will then have three full-time medical examiners working together as state employees," said John Barnes, a spokesman for Montana Attorney General Tim Fox, who oversees the medical examiner.

Montana Medical Examiner Gary Dale resigned this spring, upset that Thomas Bennett, a contractor based in Billings since 1998, continued to conduct autopsies of children for county coroners, years after he asked Dr. Bennett and the coroners to stop because of past controversial cases, according to emails and letters released by the state. Walter Kemp, who succeeded Dr. Dale, resigned this summer due to the same "unworkable situation."

In August, Montana released a review critical of Dr. Bennett's work. The state also said the use of such contractors would be discontinued.

Dr. Bennett said the findings were "flawed and incomplete," and that missives from Dr. Dale were motivated by "personal animosity." Dr. Dale declined to comment.

Coroners took the warnings about Dr. Bennett "under advisement," said Mr. Bullis, also the Montana Coroners Association spokesman, but kept using him because he was "very good and very prompt."

The alternative would have been to send bodies to western Montana. "Most of the time the coroners in eastern Montana don't have time to transfer a body 400 miles to 600 miles," he said.

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