

Nature of the Role - Coroner

The Coroners' Service

The Coroners Service for Northern Ireland (CSNI) provides administrative support to the Coroners in carrying out investigations into sudden, unexplained, suspicious or unnatural deaths occurring anywhere in Northern Ireland.

The Coroner is an independent judicial officer whose authority mostly derives from the Coroner's Act (Northern Ireland) 1959 and the Coroners (Practice and Procedure) Rules (Northern Ireland) 1963, neither of which specifically provides for the delegation by the Coroner of any of his statutory functions. CSNI is located in Belfast and is headed by a Presiding Judge from the High Court with a number of full-time Coroners.

In addition, two solicitors and one medical advisor provide professional support to the Coroners with a further nineteen staff providing the appropriate administrative support. Although the Coroners do not have direct line-management responsibility for support staff, their role involves providing direction and guidance in relation to the investigation of cases.

While the service is based in Belfast, it has responsibility for all of Northern Ireland. Travel throughout Northern Ireland to conduct inquests and liaise with stakeholders is therefore a regular occurrence for the coroners.

There is a legal requirement for a coroner to be available at all times. Therefore, a coroner must be prepared to work outside normal office hours on an on-call rota basis. While it is difficult to give an accurate indication, the on-call coroner can usually expect to receive some telephone calls during weekday nights and weekends.

The Role of Coroner

Coroners exercise a quasi-judicial role in that they discharge both judicial and administrative functions. The accurate certification of the cause of death is perhaps one of the most important functions of the coroner. The correct and logical formulation of the causal chain in death certification can at times be exacting and difficult. Where a doctor is unable to issue a death certificate in accordance with the law, the death must be reported to the coroner.

Another important function of the Coroner is the effective management of the inquest where the Coroner is required to exercise legal expertise, sound judgment and decisiveness and maintain the authority of the court while also showing courtesy and patience to vulnerable parties.

Reports of death may be made at any time and the reporting of deaths outside office hours is not uncommon. The coroner's judicial role is inquisitorial in nature and involves hands-on involvement from the time a death is reported. The coroner leads the investigation into the circumstances of the death, aided by an investigating officer appointed by the PSNI. It is the responsibility of the coroner to ensure the adequacy

of the investigation, and this lead responsibility continues until the conclusion of the inquest or a decision that an inquest is unnecessary.

The coroner must:

- Consider the circumstances of the death and decide whether a post-mortem examination and an inquest are required, taking advice as necessary.
- Liaise with the investigating police officer and ensure that the necessary enquiries are made and statements taken. Make arrangements for expert evidence, where required. On occasion, personally investigate aspects of the death.
- Liaise with the deceased's family either directly or through the Coroner's Liaison Officer or the appropriate investigating police officer. It may be necessary to meet with the family to discuss their concerns and the progress of the investigation.
- Consider the post-mortem findings and any other evidence collected, which may be technical and complex.
- Where necessary, convene a preliminary hearing to consider submissions on matters such as the scope of the inquest, choice of witnesses and human rights issues.
- Manage and conduct the inquest itself – fix a date for hearing, selecting witnesses, determine whether a jury is required and, if so, what format their finding should take.
- Question witnesses and facilitate their questioning by properly interested persons or their legal representatives
- Analyse information and extract the relevant facts in accordance with the applicable rules of evidence and procedure and to determine points of law.
- Deal with any other issues that may arise, such as requests for organs to be released for transplant, requests for a second post mortem and organ retention issues.
- Deal with often voluminous correspondence. It is important to maintain good relationships with the police, hospitals, pathologists, General Practitioners, registrars of death and other stakeholders.
- Deal with media inquiries. An inquest may concern a death in controversial circumstances and some attract media attention.

- Gain sufficient medical knowledge to engage in meaningful dialogue with members of the medical profession and to consider complex medical evidence.
- Perform a range of tasks of an administrative nature such as maintaining records, certifying the cause of death for registration purposes, and signing burial orders and cremation orders.

Draft Updated 26 Aug 2015