

**Senior Coroner  
John Leckey**

Since 2006 Northern Ireland has become a single coroner's district.

The office for the Coroners Service for Northern Ireland is based at May's Chambers, 73 May Street, Belfast. The High Court Judge, Mr Justice Weir, has been appointed as Presiding Judge of the Coroners Service.

In this interview, Mr John Leckey, Senior Coroner for Northern Ireland, gives us an insight into his role.



**What attracted you to this post?**

I qualified as a solicitor in 1974. Since my student days I have had an interest in medicine and forensic medicine – indeed I was one of the first members of the Northern Ireland Medico-Legal Society. When the post of Deputy Coroner for Greater Belfast was advertised in 1984, I decided to apply for it, was successful at interview and was subsequently appointed.

I was in this post for 8 years until I was appointed full-time Coroner for Greater Belfast on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1992. The Coroners Service for Northern Ireland came into being in April 2006 and that is when I was appointed Senior Coroner for Northern Ireland.

People often ask me what attracted me to this post and I cannot put it better than one of my colleagues in England who was interviewed for the Daily Telegraph and said “how people die is interesting” – and that’s true, it is very interesting.

**Is the job what you imagined it would be?**

It has changed considerably since I was appointed Deputy Coroner. Now families no longer accept, without reservation, what the medical profession tells them.

Family expectations are much higher than they were 10 or 15 years ago and people now are generally much more inclined to challenge judicial decisions. When I was first appointed a judicial review of a Coroner's decision was practically unknown. Now legal challenges are much more common and I think that is a reflection of how litigious our society has become.

Furthermore, the internet also gives people the ability to go online and research medical issues. Knowledge gained in this way allows them to challenge explanations given by the medical profession and to raise issues about medical care and treatment with the coroner.

Many people are not aware that a coroner has jurisdiction in relation to finds of treasure (formerly "treasure trove"). These are uncommon but when such finds are reported they provide an interesting diversion from normal coronial work. In the past I have held inquests into the finds of a Celtic gold cloak fastener on top of the Cavehill, and 12<sup>th</sup> century coins near Kilclief Castle, Co Down.

With the assistance of expert evidence from archaeologists the inquest process will determine whether the find was treasure (as defined in the legislation). If certain conditions are met a reward may be payable to the finder and the landowner.

### **What does your working week look like?**

A typical week is often split between office based work i.e. making decisions about deaths that are reported to the office, determining whether a post-mortem exam is necessary, arranging inquests with the support of my administrative staff, etc.

There are approximately 250 inquests held each year and I would estimate that my time is split 2/3rds with inquests (which can take place at any courthouse in Northern Ireland) and 1/3<sup>rd</sup> in the office.

Coroners are not like judges who sit in the High Court or County Court and have the case presented to them. A lot of a coroner's time is taken up with the investigation of the death. Our work generates a lot of correspondence and there is regular contact with bereaved families. Unlike a judge, a coroner is "hands on". The inquest process is inquisitorial in nature, there are no parties as in other court proceedings and the coroner leads the investigation.

The Coroners Office now operates an automated telephone menu system so that when a death is reported outside normal office hours a message can be left which will be dealt with by the staff the following morning. However, the duty coroner can still be contacted out of hours when something urgent has

arisen e.g. the need for permission for the harvesting of organs for transplantation purposes.

### **What is the hardest part of your job?**

Dealing with deaths of children is emotionally very difficult.

### **Is your job conducive to a good work/life balance?**

Under the legislation coroners must be available at all times.

The advent of the era of mobile telephones has made life a lot easier. For example in years past if I was out playing golf, my wife would have had to get in the car and drive to the course to tell me that a death had been reported. If I was away from my house, e.g. to visit friends, I would have had to leave a message to telephone another telephone number.

In terms of work/life balance I would say the job now is certainly more family friendly than it was 20 years ago!

A coroner must be prepared to accept calls at anytime, day or night. However, the automated telephone menu system for reports of deaths outside normal office hours has reduced significantly the incidence of that. Before that it would not have been uncommon for me to have been telephoned at home 3 or 4 times most nights. Not surprisingly, this was not conducive to a normal family life as often the entire family was woken by the sound of the telephone ringing. When I am on duty I can be contacted on my mobile telephone.

### **What part of your job gives you the most satisfaction?**

Holding an inquest and getting positive feedback from a family that they regard the investigation as having been thorough. Providing answers to questions that have been troubling a bereaved family may assist the grieving process and help to bring some measure of closure.

The job of coroner is not for everyone. It is not for the squeamish. You have to be prepared to view photographs of the scenes of death and the post-mortem examinations, read the post-mortem reports, witness statements and other material relevant to the deaths. Occasionally it may be important to attend the post-mortem examination. Contact with bereaved families is commonplace and you have to be comfortable dealing with family members who are distraught and tearful. Witnesses too may be deeply distressed and traumatised by what they have seen. Tact, sensitivity and the ability to empathize are important qualities for all coroners to possess – or at least to aspire to.

**Further information on the work of the Coroners Office can be accessed online at [www.coronersni.gov.uk](http://www.coronersni.gov.uk)**

