



Snohomish County
Medical Examiner
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FAQ Regarding Post-Mortem COVID-19 Testing

Question: Has the Snohomish County Medical Examiner's Office gone back and tested any deceased people for Covid-19 prior to Feb 29th?

Answer: The short answer is no, we are not re-investigating deaths that were reported to the Snohomish County Medical Examiner's Office (SCMEO) in January and February of this year.

Cases reported to the SCMEO fall into one of four categories:

- 1) jurisdiction declined;
- 2) jurisdiction accepted – the body is not brought in to the office or examined and the death is certified based on medical records only (generally these are deaths occurring in a medical facility of some type after a period of hospitalization);
- 3) jurisdiction accepted – the body is brought in and examined externally only
- 4) jurisdiction accepted – the body is brought in and examined externally and internally (full autopsy)

I have personally performed complete autopsies on six COVID-19 positive patients and have reviewed the pathology from cases performed by my colleagues in neighboring jurisdictions. I am confident that I can recognize the abnormalities caused by the virus in autopsy tissue samples, which are not subtle in any event. There are no unexplained cases in my office from January and February that have these changes – and I would definitely test for COVID-19 if there were.

The real question is, did we miss cases that fell into categories 1-3? We certainly could have. Unfortunately though, there is nothing that can be done about that now as those cases have long since gone to their final disposition of burial or cremation. If we did miss cases, I suspect that the number would be quite small because it has been the practice of my office to screen for infectious disease symptoms when taking death reports. This practice existed long before COVID-19 and our screening procedures for COVID-19 are not different substantively than for influenza, which we were already screening for.

It seems that the questions about re-investigating deaths have come in response to the report from Santa Clara, CA, of COVID-19 deaths from February. It is my understanding that those cases were considered suspicious for COVID-19 and autopsied in February. They are just now being reported as COVID-19 deaths because of the delay for follow-up confirmatory testing performed on autopsy tissue by the CDC. We have been able to perform all of our postmortem testing locally in coordination with the WA State Public Health Laboratory and researchers at the University of Washington and have not experienced prolonged waiting time for return of test results. Essentially, our statistics are current and we do not expect any change in what we have already reported out.

I hope that answers your questions. Thanks for your interest and have a great day.

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