

## THE ROLE OF THE CORONER IN B.C.

The sudden and unexpected death of someone close to you can raise many questions. It is the responsibility of the BC Coroners Service to confirm the identity of the deceased and investigate the circumstances of the death — the how, when, where and by what means.

If the death of a family member or friend comes without warning, or is the result of a traumatic or unexplained event, it is undoubtedly one of the most painful and distressful events in a person's life. The BC Coroners Service can offer information, and links to support, to help you through this difficult time.

The Coroner investigates to ensure that no death is overlooked, concealed or ignored, and to learn if there is anything that can be done to prevent future deaths. The Coroner may make recommendations to help prevent future deaths and improve the quality of life and public safety of British Columbians.

Coroners are dedicated individuals who are concerned about community safety, and work with grieving families in a sensitive, supportive manner. Coroners work with police, medical practitioners and other agencies as well as family and survivors, and can provide you with information and links for help and support.

### THE CORONER'S ROLE IN B.C.

The Coroner is a quasi-judicial investigator, independent from all law enforcement agencies and health authorities. Coroners come from a range of backgrounds, including medical, legal investigative and social sciences.

The Coroner will determine the identity of the deceased and the cause of death and will classify the death as natural, accident, suicide, homicide or undetermined.

The Coroner does not assign fault or blame, but conducts a fact-finding investigation into deaths that are unnatural, unexpected, unexplained or unattended. One of the most important purposes of a Coroner's investigation is to identify risk factors to prevent future deaths.

### WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE CORONER

The circumstances of each death determine what will happen next. If the death occurs outside of a medical facility the deceased is taken to a hospital morgue.

#### **Natural Death**

If circumstances indicate that the death is due to a natural disease process, the Coroner will contact the personal physician about the medical history of the deceased. If it is confirmed that the death is consistent with a natural disease process, the responsibility for completing the medical death certificate remains with the physician.

## Autopsy

If the medical cause of death cannot be determined the Coroner may order an autopsy to determine the cause. An autopsy is done in a hospital by a qualified pathologist and will be concluded as quickly as possible. The autopsy will be important to you and your family as it may help answer questions about hereditary aspects of disease. During this process, the pathologist may collect specimens for toxicological and microscopic analysis. Once the autopsy is complete, the Coroner will advise the family so they may proceed with funeral arrangements and, unless there are special circumstances, the Coroner will advise next of kin of the autopsy findings. The Coroners Service makes every effort to accommodate the religious or cultural practices of the deceased and the family within its obligation to investigate.

## Coroner's Investigation

When a death is reported to the Coroner, he/she has the authority to collect information, conduct interviews, inspect and seize documents, and secure the scene.

The facts, as determined by the investigation, are released in a written Coroner's report including, whenever possible, recommendations to prevent future deaths. This document is available by request from the local Coroners' office. The report incorporates information from all agencies involved in the death, including police, ambulance and hospitals. It also contains the findings of the autopsy. The autopsy report itself is confidential and is released only under certain conditions.

## Coroner's Inquest

An inquest is a formal court proceeding where a five-person jury hears evidence relating to a death. The presiding Coroner ensures that the jury maintains its goal of fact-finding not fault-finding. The jury classifies the death and may make recommendations to prevent future deaths under similar circumstances. A written report completes the process and is publicly available.

An inquest is mandatory if the deceased was in the care or control of a police officer or in a police lock-up at the time of their death. In all other deaths, the Coroners Service decision to proceed to inquest is determined by the merits of each individual case. In certain circumstances ongoing criminal proceedings may delay the public inquest process.

As a family member, you are not required to attend the inquest unless under subpoena. Should you choose, you may apply to participate and may be represented by counsel or an agent at the inquest.

## HELP IS AVAILABLE

### **BC Coroners Service:**

Call any office directly or call toll-free through Enquiry BC – **1 800 663-7867**

... and ask the operator to transfer your call to the office in your region:

### **B.C. Bereavement Helpline:**

Provides assistance to people who are dealing with the loss of a loved one.

- Vancouver, **604 738-9950**

- Toll-free, **1 877 779-2223**

[www.bcbereavementhelpline.com](http://www.bcbereavementhelpline.com)



<b>Fraser Region</b>
604-930-7134
<b>Interior Region</b>
250 861-7429
<b>Island Region</b>
250 952-4150
<b>Northern Region</b>
250 565-6040
<b>Metro Vancouver</b>
605 660-7708

### **VictimLINK:**

A multi-lingual, 24-hour helpline that can connect callers to a network of B.C. resources, including police and community-based victim services. You may check out the Victim Services Directory of resources online at: [www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victim\\_services](http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victim_services) or call VictimLink, toll-free: **1 800 563-0808**