

# Forsyth County EMS

## Patient Care Policy: Deceased Subjects

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1. Prehospital care personnel are obligated to begin rapid resuscitative measures on patients found to be pulseless and apneic. In all circumstances the patient will be given the benefit of the doubt and appropriate resuscitative measures will be initiated if any circumstances cause questions as to the viability of the patient. (Exceptions: Refer to Criteria for Death / Withholding Resuscitation).
2. The Medical Examiner is an officer of the State of North Carolina. The Medical Examiner has discretion as to whether he/she believes a given death is or is not within his/her jurisdiction. It is imperative that the Medical Examiner and the appropriate law enforcement agency be notified if there is any reason whatsoever to suspect that the death was unnatural.
3. The following types of deaths in North Carolina **must** be reported to the Medical Examiner:
  - Homicide.
  - Trauma
  - Suicide
  - Disaster
  - Accident
  - Violence
  - Unknown, unnatural or suspicious circumstances.
  - In police custody, jail or prison.
  - Poisoning or suspicion of poisoning.
  - Public health hazard (such as acute contagious disease or epidemic).
  - Deaths during surgical or anesthetic procedure.
  - Sudden unexpected deaths which are not reasonably related to known previous disease.
  - Deaths without medical attendance.
  - Migrant agricultural workers and their dependents.
4. General Statute Reference: GS 130A-383, Medical Examiner Jurisdiction:

Upon the death of any person resulting from violence, poisoning, accident, suicide or homicide; occurring suddenly when the deceased had been in apparent good health or when unattended by a physician; occurring in a jail, prison, correctional institution or in police custody; or occurring under any suspicious, unusual or unnatural circumstance, the medical examiner of the county in which the body of the deceased is found shall be notified by a physician in attendance, hospital employee, law-enforcement officer, funeral home employee, emergency medical technician, relative or by any other person having suspicion of such a death. No person shall disturb the body at the scene of such a death until authorized by the medical examiner unless in the unavailability of the medical examiner it is determined by the appropriate law enforcement agency that the presence of the body at the scene would risk the integrity of the body or provide a hazard to the safety of others. For the limited purposes of this Part, expression of opinion that death has occurred may be made by a nurse, an emergency medical technician, or any other competent person in the absence of a physician.

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The discovery of anatomical material suspected of being part of a human body shall be reported to the medical examiner of the county in which the material is found.

### 5. GENERAL PROCEDURES FOR HANDLING CASES OF DEATH

- a) If, in the opinion of the senior FCEMS employee on-the-scene, death has been present for sufficient time not to warrant resuscitation attempts; or if the patient has suffered major or crushing type injuries to the trunk or head with no signs of life; the senior FCEMS personnel may express an opinion of death. The senior FCEMS personnel may serve as an agent of the Forsyth County Medical Examiner under GS 130A-383.
- b) FCEMS personnel are not authorized to move or transport any natural or unnatural death cases without instructions from the physician responsible for certifying death, or in unusual circumstances, as requested and documented by a sworn law enforcement officer on-scene.
- c) The appropriate law enforcement agencies will be contacted as soon as possible via the respective communication center in cases of suspected unnatural death. Details as to the situation surrounding the death should be conveyed to the respective agencies or communication center in a professional manner, limiting detail transmitted by radio to a minimum. Use of a telephone at or near the scene is preferred.
- d) FCEMS personnel will stay on the scene and protect the integrity of the deceased until the funeral home, appropriate transport agency, or the responding unit has authority to transport the deceased. If an investigation is deemed necessary, FCEMS units may leave after proper notification has been completed. The investigating Law Enforcement Officer should be provided the contact numbers for the local private providers with instructions to contact the provider of their choice once the investigation is complete. **No FCEMS unit shall remain on-scene of a DOA more than 30 minutes without notifying the Supervisor.** It will be the Supervisor's decision whether to have the unit get 10-8 due to current call volume.
- e) The senior FCEMS crewmember is responsible for assuring that the PCR includes all relevant information, relying on responsible accounts of death. (This reporting is to be completed in all cases whether the death is natural or unnatural.)

### 6. Apparent Natural Death

- a) Natural death may be handled and certified by the private physician of the deceased if the private physician can be contacted by phone, etc., and agrees to certify the death and sign the death certificate.
- b) At the discretion of the family or situation on-the-scene, the FCEMS personnel may assist in notification of a funeral service of the family's choice and request that a funeral coach be summoned. Under no circumstances are FCEMS personnel to recommend a funeral home or transport to a funeral home.

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- c) The private physician may authorize or request the release of the deceased to a funeral home or medical facility morgue.
- d) FCEMS personnel should stand by to assist until a funeral service has arrived and appropriate information has been conveyed to the funeral director in a professional manner. FCEMS should also assist funeral home personnel in removing deceased from the scene.
- e) The Hospital copy of FCEMS Patient Care Data Worksheet, with times, should be left with funeral home personal. The FCEMS Patient Care Data Worksheet should also state the name and telephone number of the MD who agreed to sign the death certificate. **No patient treatment information should be on this copy of FCEMS Patient Care Data Worksheet.**
- f) A majority of the natural death calls can be handled effectively, professionally, and expeditiously if telephone calls can be made to the appropriate parties from the scene.

### 7. Apparent Unnatural Death

- a) Cases of unnatural death fall under the jurisdiction of the Forsyth County Medical Examiner on call. The Medical Examiner shall determine the disposition of the deceased. The request for the Medical Examiner will be made by the investigating law enforcement officer on-the-scene or by FCEMS personnel.
- b) Telephone notification of the Medical Examiner should be made by the appropriate law enforcement agency. FCEMS personnel may be asked to notify the Medical Examiner by law enforcement. If so asked, FCEMS personnel should assist law enforcement.
  - i) When necessary to provide general information to dispatch by radio or over the telephone regarding the environment and circumstances involved with the deceased, this should be communicated in a professional manner.
  - ii) The Medical Examiner on call should be given a brief concise report of the situation and apparent circumstances regarding the death. The Medical Examiner should receive the courtesy of telephone numbers to call back to FCEMS or law enforcement personnel on-the-scene if he/she needs to do so.
- c) The Medical Examiner may elect not to report to the scene and may give verbal authorization and instructions for the disposition of the deceased. FCEMS personnel may act on verbal instructions from the Medical Examiner whether the instructions were communicated directly or relayed by radio. These instructions must be clearly documented on the PCR and FCEMS Patient Care Data Worksheet to include the name of the doctor/Medical Examiner, phone number or method of contact, name and phone number of person relaying the instructions, name and agency of any person to whom you pass instructions, and disposition of the incident.

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- d) FCEMS personnel will take all necessary precautions to protect the integrity of the scene where the death took place in order to allow for a complete investigation by law enforcement or other authorities.
  
- e) All full time physicians at Forsyth ED and Dr. Roy L. Alson, are medical examiners. Forensic Pathologists at WFUBMC are Medical Examiners and can be contacted via page operator at 716-2011. Inform operator who you are and that you need to speak to the Medical Examiner on call.

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Approved by:  
COL Dan Ozimek  
EMS Director  
October, 2003

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Approved by:  
Dr. R.L. Alson  
Medical Director  
October, 2003