3.1 COVID-19 Disease: Postmortem Considerations

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The COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges which have affected the performance of the conventional postmortem examination in known Sars-Cov-2 positive cases and hence the accurate determination of both cause and manner of death in medicolegal postmortem examinations. Forensic practitioners participating in MLDI are at constant risk of exposure to Covid-19 and other infections. The safety of autopsy personnel is of outmost importance and best safety practices must be applied and pursue innovation so as to improve MLDI standards and instill confidence in a community that is clamoring for justice.

Covid-19 disease remains the most urgent international health emergency. Forensic practitioners have stood their ground in safeguarding the justice ecosystem whilst attempting to preserve personal health without compromise of the expected high standards of medicolegal death investigation (MLDI). The many potential occupational health hazards and safety associated with Covid-19 disease have occurred within MLDI. Practitioners have had to quickly adapt and readjust policies and procedures to respond adequately to the necessary changes needed to effectively deal with medicolegal death investigation. The need for workplace modifications, delays in usual operations, increased cost, unceasing pressure of increased workload, additional professional responsibilities, an increase behind the scenes operations contributed to and increased psychological demands of MLDI staff have all contributed to the acquisition of knowledge on the approaches to medicolegal death investigation during the pandemic.

This presentation will highlight the many questions which have arisen from all categories of personnel involved in MLDI and the public and will provide a cadre of practical, medicine/science-based responses to these that will cover concerns on scene examination, the handing of a known or suspected COVID-19 positive body for transportation to the mortuary, the procedures of postmortem examination, sample collection, and the release of a body to the relatives for disposal (out of jurisdiction transportation, burial or cremation).

Educational Objectives

By the end of the presentation, participants will be able to:
1. Describe the procedures involved in the performance of a conventional postmortem examination.
2. Discuss the opportunities for transmission of infections during postmortem examination and the empirical preventive measures which are utilized to reduce the risk.
3. Discuss the specific risks of infection to be considered in the performance of postmortem examination considerations on known and suspected COVID-19 disease cases and the polices and procedures which can be implemented to mitigate against these risks.