

# PROJECT ECHO: OD-FIT

Overdose Fatality Investigation Techniques

## Differentiating Between Suicidal and Accidental Drug Overdoses

One of the important components of a medicolegal death investigation is the certification of the manner of death. For a drug-related death, this usually involves determining between “accident” and “suicide.” In rare cases, a classification of “undetermined” may be best. A thorough investigation, complete with scene investigation, record review, interviews, autopsy, and toxicology, will inform this determination.

### Relevant Terminology

- **Manner of death (MOD):** A classification system based on the circumstances under which death occurred; usually consists of an accident, homicide, natural, suicide, and undetermined. The manner of death listed on the death certificate is used for public health and vital statistics purposes.
- **Accident:** Death due to any external factors that are not self-inflicted, including self-harm without intent to cause death, a motor vehicle crash that does not suggest suicide or homicide, and unexpected or unforeseen death due to injury or poisoning without intent to harm or cause death.
- **Homicide:** Traumatic death occurring at the hand of another person (either by commission or omission). Demonstration of intent to harm is not necessarily required. Death as a result of a volitional act committed by another person (e.g., injury, poisoning). The classification of homicide does not necessarily indicate that a crime was committed.
- **Natural:** Death due solely to natural disease. No contributing factors or trauma.
- **Suicide:** Death resulting from a fatal self-inflicted trauma with intent to injure self at the time of injury. Death resulting from intentional/volitional self-inflicted act.
- **Undetermined:** Manner of death used when the information pointing to one manner of death is no more compelling than another when the circumstances surrounding the death are unknown. A designation for deaths where more than one manner of death can be reasonably considered.
- **Prescription drug monitoring program (PDMP):** State-based electronic database for the tracking of the prescription and dispensation of drugs.

### Key Takeaways

- A thorough medicolegal death investigation begins at the scene, and findings at the scene will help inform the next steps to take in the investigation, and ultimately, the determination of the manner of death. This includes obvious findings such as a suicide note and/or an empty bottle of recently filled medication. It can also extend to items such as why the decedent was where they were at the time of their death, indicators of substance use or misuse, or finding documents indicative of financial and/or marital troubles. A review of records including PDMP, criminal, and medical, along with information from interviews also informs the certifier regarding the most appropriate determination of manner of death.

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- For most drug-related deaths, the manner of death is best classified as “accident.” If there is clear evidence from the scene investigation and autopsy to indicate that the decedent was attempting to cause their death by the ingestion of a substance(s), the manner of death should be certified as “suicide.” However, if there are findings at autopsy indicative of suicide but no findings from the investigation to indicate evidence of self-harm (or vice versa), a classification of “undetermined” for the manner of death is appropriate for public health and public safety certification.

To learn more about differentiating between suicidal and accidental drug overdose, check out the [session recording](#) and slides or email [odfitecho@astho.org](mailto:odfitecho@astho.org) for more information.

#### References

- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Statistics Reporting Guidance, Report No. 2. A reference guide for completing the death certificate for drug toxicity deaths, 2019. May. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvss/vsrg/vsrg02-508.pdf>.
- National Association of Medical Examiners. A Guide for Manner of Death Guidelines, First Edition. 2002. Available at <https://name.memberclicks.net/assets/docs/MANNEROFDEATH.pdf>.

**About the Presenter:** Thomas Gilson, MD, is the chief medical examiner and Crime Laboratory Director of Cuyahoga County, located in Metropolitan Cleveland. Before assuming this position in 2011, Gilson served as chief medical examiner in Rhode Island. He is board-certified in Forensic Pathology and has over 25 years of experience as a practicing medical examiner. Gilson was awarded a Medical Doctor degree from The Medical College of Pennsylvania and served as a resident in anatomic and clinical pathology at the University of Cincinnati Pathology. He received his forensic training during a Fellowship with the Medical Examiner of New York City. Gilson's academic interests include the opioid crisis in the United States and the interface of forensic medicine with public health.

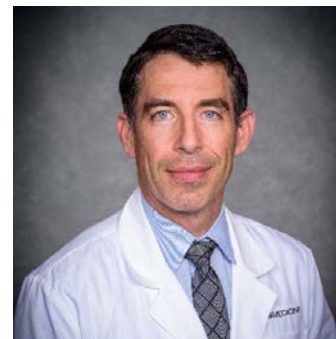


**About the Presenter:** Kelly Keyes is a board-certified medicolegal death investigator who is currently a research forensic scientist in the Center for Forensic Sciences at RTI International. This follows over 24 years at work in a large sheriff coroner’s office in California, primarily as a death investigator. Keyes spent much of her career as a supervising investigator, performing and overseeing over 10,000 death investigations and certifying thousands of death certificates over her career. She has investigated and supervised death investigations of all types. Keyes is the president-elect for the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners, an affiliate member of the National Association of Medical Examiners, a member of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, and chair of the MDI subcommittee of the National Institute of Standards and Technology Organization of Scientific Area Committees.



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**About the Presenter:** Daniel W. Dye, MD, is an associate professor of Pathology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), and he is an appointed associate coroner/medical examiner for Jefferson County, Alabama. His main research interests center on the impacts of death certification on public health. He is active in the National Association of Medical Examiners and currently serves on the Board of Directors. When not taking care of service work at the Jefferson County Coroner/Medical Examiner Office, Dye is involved in education and is the Director of the Forensic Pathology Fellowship Program at UAB.



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