



Northern Ireland

Courts and  
Tribunals Service

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# Coroners Service for Northern Ireland



An Agency within

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Justice

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serving the community through  
the administration of justice

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## Coroners

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### Who are the Coroners?

Coroners are independent judicial officers who are available to deal with matters relating to deaths that may require further investigation to establish the cause of death.

Coroners in Northern Ireland can either be barristers or solicitors and are appointed by the Lord Chancellor.

### What do Coroners do?

Coroners inquire into deaths reported to them that appear to be:

- unexpected or unexplained;
- as a result of violence;
- an accident;
- as a result of negligence;
- from any cause other than natural illness or disease; or
- in circumstances that require investigation.

The Coroner will seek to establish the cause of death and will make whatever inquiries are necessary to do this e.g. ordering a postmortem examination, obtaining witness statements and medical records, or holding an inquest.

## Where is the Coroners Service Office?

The Coroners Service is based in Mays Chambers, Belfast.

The address and other contact details are:

Coroners Service for Northern Ireland

Mays Chambers

73 May Street

Belfast, BT1 3JL

Telephone: 028 9044 6800

Fax: 028 9044 6801

E-mail: [coronersoffice@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:coronersoffice@courtsni.gov.uk)

Web: [www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk)

## Who helps the Coroner?

The Coroners Service has dedicated staff based in the Coroners Office in Belfast. They support the work of the Coroner and will be able to deal with most queries you have regarding a death that has been reported to the Coroner.

There are a number of other people who will also normally help the Coroner in the investigation of a death and may need to speak to you about the deceased:

- Police Officers,
- Doctors,
- Pathologists.

Sometimes, depending on the circumstances of the death, there will be other people who also may need to speak to you for example officers from the Police Ombudsman or the Health and Safety Executive.

## Reporting a Death

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### Are all deaths reported to the Coroner?

No. In most cases, a GP or hospital doctor can certify the medical cause of death and the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages can register the death in the usual way.

However, if a doctor has not seen and treated the deceased for the condition from which they died within 28 days of death, or the death occurred in any of the circumstances detailed below, then the death should be reported to the Coroner.

### When is a death reported to the Coroner?

A death is reported to the Coroner in the following situations:

- a doctor did not treat the person during their last illness;
- a doctor did not see or treat them in the 28 days before they died;
- the cause of death was sudden, violent or unnatural such as an accident, or suicide;
- the cause of death was murder;
- the cause of death was an industrial disease of the lungs such as asbestosis; or
- the death occurred in other circumstances that may require investigation.

A death in hospital should be reported if:

- there is a question of negligence or misadventure about the treatment of the person who died;
- they died before a provisional diagnosis was made and the general practitioner is not willing to certify the cause; or
- the patient died as the result of the administration of an anaesthetic.

A death should be reported to the Coroner by the police, when:

- a dead body is found;
- a death is unexpected or unexplained; or
- a death occurs in suspicious circumstances.

A death should be reported by the governor of a prison, immediately following the death of a prisoner.

## Who else can report a death?

A death can also be reported to the Coroner by:

- the Registrar of Deaths,
- a Funeral Director,
- any member of the public, provided the death falls into one of the categories listed above.

Members of the deceased's family, who have concerns about the cause of death given by a doctor, may contact the Coroners Office to discuss this with the Coroner.

## What will the Coroner do when a death is reported?

Initially the Coroner will gather information to investigate whether the death was due to natural causes and if a doctor can certify the medical cause of death.

The Coroner will authorise the police to gather this information which means that they will need to speak to relatives and others present when the death occurred or involved in the care of the deceased.

If the reason why a doctor cannot certify the death is simply because they have not treated the patient in the last 28 days, then the Coroner will discuss the cause of death with the doctor. If the Coroner is satisfied that the death was from natural causes and no further investigation is necessary, then the Coroner may accept the medical cause of death that the doctor gives and issue a Coroners notification to enable the death to be registered.

If a doctor cannot certify the medical cause of death then the Coroner will investigate the death and may order a postmortem examination to be carried out.

## Postmortem Examination

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If the Coroner orders a postmortem examination then a member of the family will be asked to formally identify the body. This could either be to the police at the place where the death has happened or it could be later at the mortuary before the postmortem examination is carried out.

A Coroners Liaison Officer will contact the family and give them information on the preliminary cause of death once the postmortem examination is completed.

### Why is a postmortem examination ordered?

The postmortem examination is a key stage in the Coroner's investigation as its findings identify the medical cause of death and often determine whether any further action on the part of the Coroner is required.

The Coroner will normally notify relatives of the need for a postmortem examination via the police unless this is not practicable or would unduly delay the examination. The consent of the next-of-kin is not required for a Coroner's postmortem examination. The next-of-kin can be represented at the examination by a doctor of their choice.

The postmortem examination is carried out as soon as possible after death and every effort is made to minimise any delay. The Coroner will release the body back to the family as soon as possible after the examination to enable the funeral to take place.

## What is a postmortem examination?

A postmortem examination is a medical examination of the body. It is carried out on behalf of the Coroner by a pathologist in the State Pathologists Department or, in certain cases, by a hospital pathologist.

The postmortem examination may involve the removal and examination of organs of the body. Invariably, the pathologist conducting a postmortem examination will require forensic laboratory tests to be carried out to enable an accurate diagnosis to be established. This may result in organs and various samples of tissue being retained for later inspection.

In cases where it has proved necessary to retain organs or tissue for further examination the Coroners Liaison Officer will inform next of kin of this. Relatives will be asked to indicate what they would like to happen to any tissue or organs that have been retained if they are released at a later time.

Organs and tissue can only be released on the authority of the Coroner to a funeral director for burial or cremation.

## Where is a postmortem examination carried out?

The postmortem examination is usually carried out at Northern Ireland Regional Forensic Mortuary in Belfast. A postmortem may also in a small number of cases be carried out at a hospital.

## Will a postmortem examination delay the funeral?

As the postmortem examination is normally carried out soon after death, the funeral arrangements should not need to be unduly delayed. However it is important to remember that the examination will take some time to carry out and this should be allowed for when making the funeral arrangements.

If a death has been reported to the Coroner, funeral arrangements should not be finalised until the Coroner's permission to release the body is received.

## When is the body released?

Normally the body will be released immediately following the postmortem examination. However in a very small number of cases, where there is an ongoing criminal investigation into the death, it may be necessary to retain the body for a longer period of time.

If charges have been brought against someone for causing the death, it may be necessary to have a second postmortem examination or further investigations, and the release of the body and the funeral arrangements may be delayed because of this.

## When will the results of the postmortem examination be available?

The subsequent laboratory tests, carried out after the postmortem examination, may take considerable time to complete. Therefore it is possible that the final written postmortem report will not be available for some time after the death.

## What is in the postmortem report?

The postmortem report gives details of the examination of the body. It may also give details of any laboratory tests which have been carried out.

Normally the deceased's medical practitioner is advised in writing of the medical cause of death contained in the postmortem report and will be sent a copy of the complete report. The family will also be advised when the final report has been received to enable them to make contact with the doctor. Because the report contains medical terminology it is advisable to have the assistance of a doctor when reading it to enable a full explanation to be given.

The Coroner may also make a copy of the report available to the family directly if this is requested.

The Coroner may also make the postmortem report available to a party who has a "proper interest". Persons with a 'proper interest' include:

- other relatives of the deceased;
- the executors of the deceased's will or persons; appointed as the deceased's personal representative;
- solicitors acting for the next-of-kin;
- insurers with a relevant interest;
- anyone who may, in some way, be responsible for the death;
- others appearing to the Coroner to have a proper interest.

## What happens after the postmortem examination?

If the postmortem examination shows that the death was from natural causes and the Coroner decides there is no need for an inquest, then the Coroner will issue a Coroners certificate so that the death can be registered.

If the postmortem examination shows that the death was not from natural causes, then the Coroner may decide to hold an inquest and the death cannot be registered until after the inquest has been held.

The holding of an inquest is at the discretion of the Coroner but the views of the family can be made known to the Coroner and will be considered before any decision is made.

## Death Registration

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### When can the death be registered?

If the death was due to natural causes which a doctor is able to confirm, the Coroner will advise the Registrar by issuing a Coroners notification and the death can be registered and a death certificate issued relatively quickly.

However, if a postmortem examination is ordered, or an inquest may be held, then the death cannot be registered until the Coroner's investigation has been completed.

A death certificate cannot be issued until the Registrar of Deaths has the appropriate certificate from the Coroner. In all cases the local Registrar will contact the family once they receive the Coroner's certificate and ask that they attend and provide the details required for registration.

Before the final registration the Coroner's Liaison Officer will provide the family with a "Coroner's Certificate of Evidence of Death". While this can sometimes assist in the administration of the estate it must be noted that not all financial institutions will act on this and it may be necessary to await the issue of the final Coroners certificate and registration of the death. This certificate cannot be used to register the death with the Registrar of Deaths.

## Inquest

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In Northern Ireland most deaths reported to the Coroner do not require an inquest.

### What is an inquest?

An inquest is an inquiry into the circumstances surrounding a death. The purpose of the inquest is to find out who the deceased person was and, how, when and where they died, and to establish the details the Registrar of Deaths needs to register the death.

### When will I know if an inquest is to be held?

Once the Coroner's investigation into the death has finished, the Coroner will usually decide if an inquest is to be held. This can take some time to complete and is dependent on the circumstances of the death and the final report of the postmortem examination.

The postmortem report may not be received until some considerable time following the postmortem examination.

If, once the investigation is completed, the Coroner decides that an inquest is not necessary the Coroner will issue a Coroner's certificate to the Registrar of Deaths. The Registrar will then ask a relative to call and register the death.

The Coroners Office will be able to keep you informed of the progress of the Coroner's investigation and you should contact the office if you have any questions.

There is a separate leaflet on inquests and the procedures involved. This will be sent to you by the Coroners Office if the Coroner decides an inquest is necessary.

## Other Matters

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### Is the Coroner concerned with organ transplants?

If the death has to be reported to the Coroner, you need the Coroner's permission before any organs are donated for transplant or the body is donated for medical research. The transplant co-ordinator in the hospital may provide guidance and assistance to the family in this situation.

### What happens if someone has been charged with causing the death?

If the Coroner is informed that some person or persons have been charged with an offence directly leading to the death of the deceased, the inquest or decision on holding an inquest will be postponed until after the conclusion of the criminal proceedings.

After the criminal proceedings have finished the Coroner will consider if an inquest should be held.

If the Coroner decides not to hold an inquest, the Registrar of Deaths is given a Coroner's certificate which will also include details of the cause of death together with the result of the criminal proceedings. This will enable the death to be registered.

### What about other court proceedings?

Any civil court proceedings would normally follow the inquest if one is held, as it is the inquest which decides the facts about the cause of death. The inquest may help the family of the deceased find out what happened and in the case of a

death arising from an accident at work, it may help to avoid similar accidents by highlighting the dangers.

## Removing a body from Northern Ireland

If the Coroner is informed that a body is to be taken out of Northern Ireland for burial or cremation (whether or not there has been an inquest) and the Coroner is satisfied that the cause of death is known, then a Coroner's certificate will be issued, usually to an undertaker, allowing the body to be removed.

## Deaths outside Northern Ireland

If a death occurs outside Northern Ireland, it will be necessary to obtain authorisation for the body to be removed and brought back to Northern Ireland from the country where the death occurred. The British or Irish Embassy or Consulate will be able to provide advice on this.

A Northern Ireland Coroner has no authority to investigate a death which occurs abroad.

If a death has happened on a ship, the Coroner in the place the body comes ashore must send certain details of the death to the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen.

## Is a Coroner concerned with any other type of inquiry?

A Coroner has the authority to investigate if treasure is found. Treasure can include objects not made of gold or silver but of significant historical value.

Depending on any prior interests and rights, treasure normally goes to the Crown. The Coroner must be told within 14 days if any treasure is found and it is an offence not to do so.

Occupiers and landowners have the right to be told about any finds of treasure on their land and, along with the finder, can get a reward. A Coroner's inquest into a find of treasure may be held without a jury unless, in a particular case, the Coroner thinks it is appropriate to have one. An inquest will decide if the find is treasure, who the finder is and where and when the object was found.

The Environment and Heritage Service is responsible for treasure. They can be contacted at:

The Environment and Heritage Service  
5-33 Hill Street  
Belfast  
BT1 2LA  
Phone: 028 9054 3083  
[www.ehsni.gov.uk](http://www.ehsni.gov.uk)

## Disabled court users

The Customer Service Officer or Disability Liaison Officer will be able to give you information about the facilities that are available for disabled people.

## Complaints

The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service respects the views of all court users. A separate leaflet 'Making a Complaint' provides information on how to make a complaint. To obtain a copy of this leaflet, ask a member of staff or contact the address on the back of this publication.

Should you require any further information about the NI Courts and Tribunals Service please visit our website at [www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk) or alternatively contact Communications Group.

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