

The role of Forensic Pathologists

Please note that this document includes links to other documents and organisations outside of Government.

Pathology is the science of the causes and effects of diseases, especially the branch of medicine that deals with the laboratory examination of samples of body tissue for diagnostic or forensic purposes. Its relevance to the investigation of death is that when the police or a coroner is attempting to determine the probable cause of death, the services of a pathologist are often required.

Pathologists are doctors who are specialised in the field, and although there are 19 different specialties of pathologists, the majority are 'histopathologists', who examine microscopic samples of human tissue to determine disease. Some histopathologists assist coroners to conduct non-forensic post mortem examinations in cases where the death is not suspicious, but where the coroner needs to identify a medical cause of death. The pathologists who are concerned with the investigation of suspected homicide are 'forensic pathologists', sometimes assisted by paediatric pathologists specialising in children and organ specific pathologists who specialise in examining brains, hearts, eyes and bones etc., depending on the complexity of individual cases.

The first port of call for assisting the police and coroners in cases where homicide is suspected is forensic pathologists who are registered on a list held by the Home Office. These are known as '[Home Office Registered Pathologists](#)'. There are between 35 to 40 such pathologists who work in group practices across England and Wales and they provide a 24/7 service to the police and coroners in 'suspicious' death cases. These specialist medical practitioners undergo over four years of additional training in forensic pathology after they have fully qualified as doctors. Home Office forensic pathologists must be registered with the [General Medical Council](#) and hold a licence to practice within the UK. They must also be members of the [Royal College of Pathologists](#) . Once practitioners have the necessary qualifications, they may follow the application process to seek inclusion on the Home Office Register.

If the police are dealing with a death scene and require medical advice to determine the cause of death, or wish to retrieve forensic trace samples from the body, a

forensic pathologist can be called to the scene to assist and advise. This is always done with the agreement of the coroner. The forensic pathologist can also advise on body recovery, to ensure that vital trace evidence is not lost when the body is moved to the mortuary.

When the body is removed from the scene, the police ensure that continuity exists from the point of removal, until the time that the body is identified to the forensic pathologist at the mortuary. Once identification takes place, the post mortem, which is sometimes also referred to as an 'autopsy' or 'necropsy' will commence.

The process of the post mortem is laid out in general terms within the [Code of Practice](#) and Performance Standards. The police guidance is contained within the [Police Approved Professional Practice](#) database held by the [College of Policing](#), but generally, the police will supply a Crime Scene Manager to attend the mortuary, together with Crime Scene Investigators, one of which will act as the exhibits officer.

The forensic pathologist will conduct the post mortem by firstly making a detailed external examination of the body for signs of foul play. They will also assist police forensic staff in the recovery of forensic trace evidence. Samples will be taken for histological examination and toxicology tests and sometimes organs may need to be examined by other specialist pathologists in complex cases.

Before the body is released to the next of kin for burial or cremation, there will often be a second or 'defence' post mortem which will be undertaken on behalf of the defendant in the case, and conducted by a different pathologist. This second post mortem can be either a physical check of the first autopsy findings by re-examining the body or it may take the form of a desk top review of the original pathologist's notes, report, histology and photographs taken.

When all of the results of tests are collected, the forensic pathologist will produce a report for the coroner and a witness statement for the police. Once this is done, it is not necessarily the end of the case for the forensic pathologist, who may be asked to advise police and prosecutors throughout the investigation by attending meetings and conferences as well as giving evidence at court.