

King County Somali Health Board Meeting with Medical Examiner's Office

New Holly Library
April 24, 2013, 4:30 - 5:45 PM

Attendees

Bria Chakofsky-Lewy (Harborview), Anab Abdullah (Harborview), Martine Pierre-Louis (Harborview), Mohamed Roble, Mohamed Ali (Somali Health Board), Richard Harruff, MD (Medical Examiner's Office-Public Health), Robin Pfohman (Public Health)

Meeting notes

Representatives from the Somali Health Board met with Dr. Richard Harruff, King County's Chief Medical Examiner to learn more about the role/purpose of the Medical Examiner's Office (MEO). The objectives were several, including:

- To re-establish a dialogue between Somali community leaders and the MEO.
- To increase the awareness of Somali communities' understanding of the purpose of the MEO, what its role, and its limitations.
- To update and develop information that can be used to educate Somali leaders as well as MEO staff regarding the cultural/religious customs of the Somali communities in King County.

Key aspects of the discussion included:

- Role/Purpose of the MEO

Dr. Harruff explained the role and orientation of the MEO. It about finding the truth in a death situation- what is the determining truth is the primary mission – it is not to help the police or to protect the rights and interests of one person over another but of protecting the entire community.

- Autopsy

When somebody dies, the body shouldn't be moved. Families should notify the authorities. In cases where a natural death has occurred, a doctor will sign the birth certificate. In cases where the cause of death may be suspicious, the MEO goes to the scene, will take pictures and arrange for transport to the MEO.

In the United States, an autopsy is a medical procedure performed for legal purposes. The MEO office determines whether an autopsy is required. Typically, autopsies are performed when:

- death occurs suddenly and expectantly
- death is a homicide
- death is the cause of a collision or accident
- death occurs in the hospital without a clearly identified cause

Families cannot refuse to allow an autopsy. If the MEO decides an autopsy is the only way to determine the cause of death, than families are legally required to comply.

In cases where it is suspected a person died from an overdose or due to drugs, and the body does not show any signs of violence, the MEO takes samples and sends to lab for toxicology testing. This elongates the process but should create a delay in burying the body.

In an autopsy, a sample is taken from each organ in the body. The standard is to show that all organs in the body are healthy so the MEO needs to take a sample of each. Blood is only taken for toxicological testing. In Islam, the body must be buried intact. In the MEO's office Somali leaders/Imams have watched the autopsies of Somali Muslims to assure the family that their loved one's organs are put back in place.

- Timing

When there is a police investigation- there is typically a criminal investigation going on. In these cases, the MEO can't release information that may interfere with the investigation.

In Somalia, when someone dies, it was customary to bury him/her on the same day or within 24 hrs. of the death. The delay caused by the need for an autopsy may be a concern to the community- not only because of the delay but the nature of the autopsy as well.

The MEO always has pathologists on duty. In rare occasions, on weekends - the on-call pathologist may be able to determine over the phone whether or not an autopsy is required but typically the on-call pathologist is only available to answer questions. In some cases Harborview doctors might misinform families that an autopsy won't be required when the MEO might determine otherwise. Ultimately, it is the MEO's role to determine when an autopsy is necessary to determine cause of death.

- Respect

The King County MEO takes their work very seriously as operates at the highest standards. In all aspects, they do what they can to preserve humanity and respect in all phases of the process. There is currently only one female pathologist on staff so it's not always possible to assign cases by gender. Typically on a Monday morning, after the weekend, they will have 15 bodies that need to be autopsied with results out by noon.

- Growing Somali presences in King County

In the past, when someone in the Somali community died, the family knew whom to call – Mohamed Ali Roble, Mohamed Sheikh Hassan and one other leader. With the increasing number of Somalis and the growing number of communities, families no longer know whom to call for help.

- Need for Education and Outreach

All present agreed that more outreach and education in the various Somali communities would be a helpful next step. Somali leaders also agreed that educating/informing the Imams at the mosques is critical. The MEO also acknowledged there is room for education of the MEO staff regarding the Somali culture and religion and that partnership/relationship building is important.

- Next Steps

We agreed to meet again in early June, recognizing the need to update existing material and finalize other material that was started but never completed. One suggestion included joining some of the documents Ethnomed has developed to represent both sides of the experience- the Somali along with the MEO. Ethnomed will be invited to the next meeting.