

Explore the Riverbend: Coroner's office is bridge between life and death

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Madison County Coroner Steve Nonn views his office's top priority to give a forensic voice to the body that can no longer speak.

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“We relay the forensic evidence back to family, law enforcement and other interested parties,” he said. “We try to tell the story of what happened and knowing the process gives the family some closure.”

Many wonder exactly what the inside of coroner’s operation would look like and recently Riverbender.com was given a tour and insight into the Madison County Coroner’s Office morgue operation in Wood River.

The administrative side of the coroner’s office is located in Edwardsville.

Nonn said often the public doesn’t know that the coroner’s office has some of the same powers as the sheriff and a key component of its job is to investigate deaths of suspicious nature.

“This coroner’s office is a bridge between life and death,” Nonn said. “We work with law enforcement to establish a cause and manner of death. Once we know the cause, it allows law enforcement to prosecute.”

Autopsies, an important role

Each year, the Madison County Coroner’s office performs 120-140 autopsies.

Nonn describes this as some of the steps in the autopsy process:

The body to be analyzed is brought into the autopsy room where there are two tables, so two can be performed at once if necessary. The body is disrobed, photographed, jewelry is bagged and tagged and investigators go over the front of the body to see if there are any signs of the cause of death. Any scars, marks, tattoos, wounds or injuries are photographed and documented. The body is turned over for a similar analysis.

After the examination, a classic Y incision is made on both the shoulders down the sternum to the stomach at the naval. At this point, all organs are exposed depending on the kind of case being examined. When a shooting occurred and if a bullet remains in the body, after it has been X-rayed, it is photographed and packed to be turned over to law enforcement. The trail of the bullet has to be documented and photographed. If it is a knife kind of wound, the organ touched is examined and photographed.

“A lot of this has to do with what killed them and also have to be what didn’t kill them,” Nonn said about an autopsy. “Eliminating causes of death is as much of this as documenting them. After the internal organs are looked at, the skull is opened and the brain is exposed.

“If there is no damage to brain, samples will still be taken to make sure there are not obvious tumors. Everything is put back after the process is finished and everything is sewed back up. The body is cleaned and whatever funeral home is handling the case, will take the body and prepare it for embalming for a funeral. Normally, you can’t tell that a person has had an autopsy.”

The morgue area consists of an office, a storage area, and evidence rooms that are locked, with only a few having access. In the evidence rooms, there are seized drugs, firearms, knives and clothing. The evidence stays there until it is either turned over to law enforcement, family if there are keepsakes, or destroyed.

Each year, the coroner’s office in Madison County receives an average of 2,700 calls to assist. A report is generated for each activity.

Misconceptions about death

The Madison County Coroner said there are some common misconceptions about death.

“We hear all the time about people defecating on themselves when they die and urinating on themselves and that is not true,” Nonn said. “Once in a blue moon that might happen, but it is much more common not to happen. Another is that people die with their eyes closed. There is no exact percentage here, I would say it is about 50-50. Contrary to what used to be shown in movies, coins on eyes do not close them.”

Something many want to know about a person’s death is whether they suffered or not. Sometimes it is not possible to know that, Nonn said.

Much of the coroner’s office work is with clinical and forensic cases. As an example with a gunshot death, things are pieced together to determine a cause of death.

Roger Smith, the chief deputy coroner, is experienced in not only work in the coroner’s office, but law enforcement and the funeral business. Nonn said Smith and his other staff are invaluable to the success of the operation.

The coroner’s office performs autopsies in the county and draws toxicology samples for those with a standard set of processes.

Nonn had extensive experience with the Madison County Sheriff’s Department and he said he believes that has helped him in his position as county coroner.

The coroner said the department has to be ready to go into action 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

“You never know when the next call will come,” he said. “It could be to come to a crash scene, a suspicious suicide or a homicide.”

Strong interviewing technique is a necessity with the coroner’s office members. The team also works hand in hand with the sheriff’s department and other law enforcement officials throughout the county.

There are peaks and valleys in the workload, sometimes several cases to investigate in a day.

“We have to be ready to respond,” Nonn said.

Nonn said he always wanted to be in law enforcement, starting at age 8 years old. He spent 26 years in the Madison County Sheriff’s Department and was a detective for 21 years. He was also a member of the Major Case Squad. Nonn was elected in 2000 and he said he had the support of Dallas Burke when she retired.



On the job

Those in the coroner’s office are equipped with badges and carry a gun and holster, much like their counterparts in law enforcement, something some may not realize.

A camera, bone saw, pathologist, scalpel, forceps and plastic gloves can all be found in the office. Each coroner's office person is equipped with a gauge to investigate liver temperature. This requires an incision, but it is marked and circled. Knowing the temperature helps with discovering the length of time someone has been dead. Shovels, rakes are used out in the field. Full body protection is needed in situations that might involve respiratory disasters. The key is putting the protective equipment on and off the proper way, the coroner said.

Each member of the Madison County Coroner's office team are certified as American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators, which requires multiple tests. A few have a higher ranking in that realm, taking more difficult tests.

Madison County uses three forensic pathologists to perform autopsies when it appears there could be criminal implications and two clinical pathologists when it is obvious a crime didn't occur in the death.

Nonn said it takes a particular type of person to work in the department and a certain mindset.

“You have to find a satisfaction you are performing a service that is valuable to community, citizens of the county and families,” Nonn said of the coroner's office work. “With that job satisfaction you learn how to compensate for the horrors and the cruelty you see in this job with the fact that you are doing something of true importance and providing answers to families with questions and closure.”

