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Post Mortem Death Investigation in America
An Investigative Series by ProPublica, NPR, and PBS "Frontline"

Across the nation, unqualified personnel are elected coroners despite the fact that some don't have a medical background or certified training. In many cases, doctors have filled out death certificates without ever seeing the body. Because of these flaws, along with countless others, innocent people are serving life in prison and families are left assuming their elderly family member died of natural causes.

In 2011, ProPublica, NPR, and PBS "Frontline" partnered in the investigative series "Post Mortem Death Investigation in America." Together they surveyed 69 of the largest coroner and medical examiner offices around the nation, discovering forensic pathologists who are non board-certified in forensic pathology. The journalists analyzed mishandled cases of infant deaths in the U.S. reporting them as criminal acts and sending innocent people to jail. They also looked into nursing homes and learned that nurses were signing off the deaths of elderly patients as natural causes when in fact the causes were drug overdoses administered by the nurses, physical abuse, and dehydration.

As I began the process of finding a research topic, I visited the websites of some of the largest newspapers in the country, such as the Miami Herald and the Seattle Times, that have galleries dedicated to their award-winning investigative journalism. While sifting through investigative series, I could not find any with adequate databases and details explaining the data collecting process. I turned to

notable investigative journalism organizations like Investigative Reporters & Editors and ProPublica. It was through ProPublica where I found the “Post Mortem” series. I began reading one of their 29 stories in the series, *Gone Without a Case: Suspicious Elder Deaths Rarely Investigated* and was hooked.

ProPublica is a Pulitzer Prize winning non-profit online news organization dedicated to investigate journalism in the public interest. As cited on their website, their mission is “to expose abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust by government, business, and other institutions, using the moral force of investigative journalism to spur reform through the sustained spotlighting of wrongdoing.” Since their establishment in June 2008 they have accumulated a long list of awards, including a 2011 Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting, a 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Investigate Reporting, being the first to award an online news organization, and a Peabody Award in 2013.

National Public Radio, or NPR, was established in 1971 and has become a leader in news programming. NPR has dozens of bureaus around the world to ensure they are always where the news is happening. With more than 350 news staff, this multimedia news organization states on their website, “in a time of media fragmentation and sound-bites, NPR has succeeded by focusing on its core: in-depth, quality news.” They have won hundreds of awards, including 59 George Foster Peabody Awards. Aside from their online shows, there are 987 stations across the nation that air NPR programming.

Public Broadcasting Service, or PBS, is widely known as “America’s largest classroom,” producing educational, informative content for children and adults. This

private, non-profit corporation was founded in 1969 and has become a trusted source for information. PBS illustrates this on their website with a large viewership rating. "Each month, nearly 109 million people through television and over 28 million people online explore the worlds of science, history, culture, great literature and public affairs through PBS' trusted content" (PBS Press Room). Apart from their national broadcasting, PBS stations across the nation produce programming that pertains to their local community. They have received a multitude of awards in the last year alone, including two Peabody Awards, three Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, and 21 Emmy Awards for their news and documentary efforts as well as original series like "Sesame Street" and "Downton Abbey."

PBS "Frontline" is a documentary series started in 1983 that focuses on public affairs and controversial issues. Their collaboration with ProPublica, the Center for Investigative Reporting, and NPR allows its credible journalists to thoroughly research without time restraints. Because of this, some of the issues they've reported have reached members of Congress and affected policy change, nationally and internationally. The series has also won numerous prestigious awards, including a 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service, four Writers Guild Awards in 2012, and several Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards since their inception.

There were several reporters who worked together for this investigative series. Joe Shapiro is an investigations correspondent for NPR and has been with the news organization for 13 years. For this series, Shapiro was responsible for the "Child Cases" stories, in which inaccurate autopsies of young children were sending

innocent people to jail, and letting the guilty walk free. Prior to NPR, Shapiro was the Senior Writer at *U.S. News & World Report* for 19 years. He has received the Edward R. Murrow award, amongst other awards, and is the author of *NO PITY: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Right Movement*. He is a graduate of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

PBS “Frontline” producer and correspondent Lowell Bergman worked as a producer for the news magazine *60 Minutes* prior to joining PBS in 1998. He is also a professor at the University of California at Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. This veteran reporter has earned several Emmy Awards and Peabody Awards.

Krista Kjellman Schmidt joined ProPublica in 2008 and is the Deputy Editor of News Applications. She played a key role in compiling data to create the database for the series. While working at ProPublica, she has earned awards such as the Online News Association’s Gannett Foundation Award for Innovative Investigative Journalism, and an IRE Award. Schmidt has a Bachelor of Arts in Broadcast Journalism from New York University and worked as an associate producer in the investigative unit for ABC news prior to working at ProPublica. She is also an adjunct assistant professor at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Chisun Lee is a graduate of Harvard Law School and a former Knight Journalism Fellow at Yale Law School. During her time at ProPublica, Lee was awarded for her investigative reporting on Guantanamo Bay. Currently, she works in the Democracy Program at the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law.

A.C. Thompson, a reporter at ProPublica, pioneered the Post Mortem investigative series. During my telephone interview with Thompson, he said it was through his reporting on Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans where he saw the parish coroner was not impartial in determining the causes of deaths and was subjective to local political figures. He began to gather court records of autopsy reports in New Orleans, thus starting a thorough investigation. After reading a National Academy of Sciences report, Thompson realized the problems with coroner and medical examiner systems was not only a concern in New Orleans, but across the entire nation.

Through his connections with PBS “Frontline,” he found reporters who were interested in investigating this issue and then approached NPR to join the team. They then divided the coverage. ProPublica would concentrate on print, NPR primarily focused on radio, and PBS “Frontline” prepared data for their documentary.

Upon reading the series, I was absolutely appalled by how elderly patients were being treated by nurses across the nation – completely unethical behavior. What’s worse, doctors have failed to examine the bodies before filling out a death certificate. In one case, it was recorded that an 83-year-old Pennsylvania man died from Alzheimer’s disease. It wasn’t until William Neff’s body was transported to a funeral home that the funeral home director saw the many bruises across his body. After a proper autopsy, it was discovered that Neff died from five broken ribs, one of which punctured his lung, flooding his chest with blood (Lee & Thompson, 2011).

ProPublica provides a detailed description of their investigative process and how they approached data collecting. NPR compiled an extensive database with information on state medical examiner systems and county medical and coroner systems, organized by total number of autopsies, budget, number of board-certified forensic pathologists, uncertified, and fellows. It dates back from 2004 to 2010. They also provide a list of accredited offices in the United States and a death investigation state by state graphic.

Of the 69 medical examiner and coroner offices they surveyed, two were hybrid offices, which according the ProPublica means county coroners refer all cases that need to be autopsied to the state medical examiner (Schmidt, 2011), 50 were from the most densely populated counties with county-based systems, and 17 were statewide medical examiner systems. To create their database, the reporters asked each system for the following information for each year from 2004 to 2010: the total number of completed autopsies, the number of forensic pathologists working in their office, their annual office budget, the number of forensic pathologists who are board-certified in forensic pathology, the number who are not, and the number of forensic pathologist fellows, who are doctors going through an extra year of medical training in order to earn their certification in forensic pathology after passing their boards.

Contra Costa County in California was the only coroner system that did not respond with any information. ProPublica also used data from the Centers for Disease Control to analyze mortality rates in six categories including, unintentional, suicide, homicide, undetermined, legal intervention/operations of war and non-

injury, and no intent classified from 2004 to 2007 (Schmidt, 2011). With the data they collected from their 69 surveys, and data from the CDC, the reporters were able to compare autopsies per 100,000 deaths and the rates between autopsies and unintentional deaths and homicides. “We used this relationship to compute and expected autopsy rate. We then compared the expected autopsy rate and the actual autopsy rate to see whether counties and states performed fewer, more than or the expected number of autopsies, given their rates of unintentional deaths and homicides” (Schmidt, 2011).

Thompson said his team spent at least a year reporting before the story was published. The data collecting process, he said, was designed and gathered in a few short months and they hired outside help because of the atypical way they gathered their research. Because there was no pre-existing database on autopsy rates or whether forensic pathologists were board certified. The three news organizations wanted to create a holistic system database, taking state and county systems as a whole. This setback gave them an added, tedious step in gathering survey information for their database. They did not have the advantage of secondary analysis. “Because survey methodology has become so complex, it is rare to find one researcher who is an expert in all phases of large studies” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014, p. 17). The researchers did not have available databases to reference, so they had to gather data organically.

The team built their database using the ProPublica Forensics API. “Using the CDC mortality data, ProPublica looked at the relationship between the autopsy rate and the rates of unintentional deaths and homicides. They found that the higher the

homicide and unintentional-death rate in an area, the higher the autopsy rate tends to be” (NPR, 2011).

The journalists also discovered that the unreliability in medical examiner and coroner systems not only lie in the doctors and elected officials working as coroners. The government has not provided the funds and support needed to adequately facilitate forensic pathologists’ working environment. In a PBS “Frontline” interview with Dr. Victor Weedn, Assistant Medical Examiner in Maryland, he recalls a time when he worked in a converted garage with a single light dangling from the ceiling over the autopsy table. Some offices lack refrigerator space, leaving the corpse to deteriorate at a rapid speed. “Without the federal government having a voice for forensic pathology, we have largely been orphaned” (Byker & Lowell, 2011).

This thorough investigation between ProPublica, NPR, and PBS “Frontline” has exposed a dysfunctional system that, because of lack of governmental funding and federal oversight, is has become a major problem in our country. This series is well executed. Not only does it provide a detailed database, but also the public can use their interactive maps to examine the coroner and medical examiner systems in their state and county. Although the series was originally published in 2011, each news organization has continually updated the series as new information surfaces.

Citations – American Psychological Association (APA), 6th Edition

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