

Review Article**The Management of Death in Sri Lanka and Potential Solutions for the Future.****¹Mayorathan U**¹ Office of the Judicial Medical Officer, Teaching Hospital Jaffna.**ABSTRACT**

Death is an inevitable human occurrence, and ancient humans experienced anxiety and apprehension when faced with unnatural deaths. Prehistoric humans valued funeral proceedings and ceremonial rites due to their belief in life after death and reincarnation. Dead bodies can be disposed of legally or illegally. Legal methods include soil burials, entombment, cremation, or donation to medical institutions. Legal disposal requires certification by a medical practitioner and a death certificate. Illegal disposal involves secret burials, such as being thrown into waterways or burnt. Ancient societies used customs like burying corpses in uninhabited jungles or constructing “Towers of Silence” to prevent scavenging by animals. Sea burials are also practiced in some cases. To register a death, authorized individuals confirm its occurrence, transfer the body to undertakers for final disposition, and relatives register it with the registrar of birth, marriage, and death. Various death investigation methods have been implemented in different parts of the world, generally varying based on the investigating authority’s jurisdiction.

The death investigation system of Sri Lanka is based partly on the English coroner’s system. The death investigation procedure in Sri Lanka is described in Sections 369 to 373 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CCP) of Sri Lanka 1980. However, the current inquest system has several deficiencies. It is high time to adopt a system. Sri Lanka should contemplate transitioning from the inquest system to the medical examiner system, as the medical examiner system is more efficient, and several countries followed this successfully.

Key Words

Inquest, Inquirer into sudden death, Medical Examiner, Disposal of Death, Criminal procedure code

Introduction

Death is an inherent and inevitable occurrence among humans, signifying the termination of an individual’s presence in the world. Throughout history, the primordial human psyche has responded to the concept of death in various manners. Ancient humans had a limited understanding of fatalities occurring by natural causes, but they experienced anxiety and apprehension when faced with unnatural deaths. The prehistoric man attached great importance to funeral proceedings and ceremonial rites due to their belief in life after death and the idea that future existence is a direct continuation of their current existence. Under the belief in reincarnation, humanity believed that the final thought held by the dying individual and the subsequent funeral ceremonies would play a crucial role in securing a more favorable existence in the afterlife. The funeral offering might be either burial or non-burial, and the choice was determined by the cultural background of the deceased (1).

Legal mandate across the globe, is obligatory to record the death of an individual in the death registration upon their demise. Like any other country, Sri Lanka must document all fatalities without exception. For death registration, it is essential to have information regarding the individual’s name, cause of death, and the circumstances surrounding it. Thorough investigations of the death are essential to meet the aforementioned conditions (2).

This article aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the existing death disposal practices in Sri Lanka, as well as the different techniques of death investigations employed globally. Furthermore, it highlights the necessary modifications that should be implemented in the future to ensure efficient death disposal.

Corresponding author: Mayorathan U, email: m19416@pgim.cmb.ac.lk,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9940-8617>, Submitted November 2023, Accepted December 2023



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Methods of disposal

Dead bodies can be disposed of either legally or illegally. Legal disposal methods include soil burials, either with a coffin or wrapped in cloth (as is done in Jewish and Muslim traditions), entombment in a crypt or vault, cremation in a crematorium or on a pyre (as is done among Hindus and Buddhists), or donation to a medical institution for research purposes. In all cases, the death must be certified by a medical practitioner, and the registrar of deaths must issue a death certificate (3).

Illegal disposal refers to secret burials; such disposals include secreted burials either in single or mass graves, thrown into waterways, concealed in pits, thrown into the jungle, burnt, etc. The dismemberment of the body may precede such disposal. This is also referred to as surreptitious disposal (4).

Ancient societies had several customs for disposing of deceased bodies, encompassing the corpse being deposited in an uninhabited jungle, inaccessible to human beings. It is placed on a raised structure to prevent it from being scavenged by indigenous canines or other animals feeding dead flesh (5). The indigenous tribes of Australia engaged in this technique, while the Parsees of India constructed tall enclosures known as the “Towers of Silence.” The deceased corpses were positioned upon the surfaces devoid of any garments. Shortly after, vultures swiftly gather around the deceased corpse, consuming the flesh and leaving just a skeletal structure behind (6). In some special circumstances, sea burials are also practiced (7).

Current Practice of Managing a Death

In Sri Lanka, like in most countries, certificates of cause of death have a dual purpose. Firstly, they contribute to the legal record of the death; the cause of death may be significant in insurance and inheritance matters. Secondly, they are the source of mortality statistics, which have an essential part to play in medical research and Health Planning and are likely to become more valuable as methods of diagnosis and analysis improve (8).

In order to register the death, authorized individuals must officially confirm the occurrence of the death. Subsequently, the deceased corpse will be transferred to the undertakers for the purpose of carrying out the final disposition of the body, which may involve either cremation or burial. Ultimately, relatives proceed to the office of the registrar of birth, marriage, and death in order to officially register the death and acquire the death certification (9).

A. Death declaration

1. Death at home

If a death seems unnatural or suspicious, it is important to notify the Police so that they can initiate an inquest. However, the death seems to be of natural causes, and there are three procedures to declare the death officially.

A registered Medical Practitioner who is registered with the Sri Lanka Medical Council (SLMC) can be summoned. His origin does not necessarily pertain to that specific region in order to confirm and authorize the issuance of a statutory document known as the “Certificate of Cause of Death” (CCD), which is denoted as Registration B-12. Prior to issuing the Certificate of Cause of Death (CCD), medical practitioners must verify that the cause of death is accurately determined. The individual’s demise was due to natural causes. He/she has treated the deceased’s last sickness or was treated during the 14 days preceding the death and must observe the dead body (8).

In the absence of a qualified medical practitioner, the local “Grama Sevaga” has the authority to pronounce the death officially. If GS is content, they have the authority to issue a certificate in a prescribed format called “Report of the death by Grama Sevaga” (RDG), also known as Registration B-24. This certificate confirms that an individual has passed away due to a natural ailment. He lacks the authority to ascertain the cause of death since he lacks the qualifications of a medical practitioner. He must include the GS division, date of death, name,

sex, race, age, employment, and informant's name. Additionally, he should specify natural sickness as the reason of death instead of providing further details(4).

Furthermore, the body can be transported to the nearest hospital. The hospital medical officer will officially confirm the death and organize an inquest, as it is mandatory for all fatalities that occur in the outpatient department to undergo an inquest. After the inquest, the "Inquirer's Certificate of Death" (ICD) (Registration B-18) will be issued(8).

2. Death at Hospitals

When a death occurs in a hospital, whether it is a government or private hospital, a "Declaration of Death Form" (DDF) (Registration B-33) is issued by the Medical Officer if the cause of death is known and the manner of death is natural(2-4,8).

If an inquest is required per section 370 of the Criminal Procedure Code, notify the institution's Head and the police. The police will assist in the inquiry in order to conduct an inquest. Upon the request of an inquest, it is imperative that the Medical Officer refrain from completing the Declaration of Death form (DDF)(2,3,8).

If the cause of death (COD) is not known and the death is natural, the medical officer (MO) can indicate the likely COD on the Bed Head Ticket (BHT) and initiate an inquest(3,8).

If there are any suspicions, involvement of the judiciary (such as a Road Traffic Accident) or potential homicide, the probable Cause of Death (COD) should not be recorded on the BHT, even if it is already known. A formal inquest is conducted, resulting in the issuance of the "Inquirer's Certificate of Death" (ICD) (Registration B-18)(3,8).

3. Death occurs at outdoor

If a death happens outside the house or hospital, the police submit it to the ISD/Magistrate for an inquest. During this inquest, a "Inquirer's Certificate of Death" (ICD) (Registration B-18) is issued(4).

4. Death at Estates

Upon the occurrence of a death within a government estate, the estate superintendent has the authority to officially declare the death by completing a prescribed legal document. If it occurs in a natural manner(10).

B. Death Registration

The laws pertaining to this matter are specified in the "Births and Deaths Registration Act" (No. 37 of 2006) and the "Regulations for the Death Registrars"(10).

Using one of the aforementioned prescribed forms (Registration B12, B18, or B33), a family member visits the "Registrar of Birth, Marriage, and Death" and applies for a "Declaration of Death form" (Registration B-11). The completed declaration of death form, along with the aforementioned statutory form, is sent to the Registrar. Subsequently, the "Death Certificate" (DC) is issued. It includes the location and manner in which the body will be disposed of, either by burial or cremation(10).

C. Handling by undertakers

Upon obtaining the death certificate (DC), the deceased's body can be transferred to a funeral director for the purpose of making funeral preparations.

D. Disposal of the body

One can get the location for burial or cremation from the cemetery or the schedule for cremation from the crematorium following the production of the Death Certificate to the authorities.

In order to expedite funeral services in Sri Lanka, it is customary to authorize the undertakers to manage and inter the body at a cemetery or crematorium using Registration B12, B18, or B33 rather than relying on the death certificate(10). Methods of disposal of the body are summarized in Figure 1.

DISPOSAL OF DEAD

4 STEPS

1) Declaration

A) Home

- Natural-
 - Registration B 12- CCD (Certificate of COD) by a doctor (treated or viewed)
 - Registration B 24- RDG (Report of the Death by GN)- by GN e.g. Natural illness
- Unnatural/suspicious- Inform Police- Inquest

B) Hospital

- Natural and COD is Known- Registration B 33- By Ward Medical Officer
- Natural and COD is not known- Registration B 18- Inquires certificate of death- By ISD
- Unnatural/suspicious death- Inform Police- Inquest

C) Government Estate-

- Superintendent on a statutory form if it is natural.
- Unnatural/suspicious- Inform Police- Inquest

D) If suspicious/Judicial/Homicidal/COD is unknown- Police- Inquest- Post mortem by JMO- issue COD to ISD/Magistrate- Registration B 18

2) Registration

- One of the above statutory forms (B12/B 18/ B 24) + Declaration of Death form (Registration B 11)- Submit to the BDM registrar- Death Certificate will be issued in due course

3) Undertakers- Take over the body with DC

4) Disposal- Cremate/Bury the body in Cemetery/Crematorium with DC

Figure 1: Summary of Methods of death disposal.

Death Investigation

The earliest documented instance of a death inquiry conducted by a medical specialist pertains to the murder of Julius Caesar in 44 BC. During this incident, an Ancient Roman Physician named Antistius examined the deceased body and determined that out of the twenty-three stab wounds, only one penetrating injury, specifically located between the left third and fourth ribs, was ultimately lethal. Therefore, Antistius can be considered the first officially acknowledged Medical Examiner in history(11).

In 1302 AD, a group of three physicians in Bologna, Italy, carried out the initial instance of a postmortem examination that a magistrate had ordered. The examination was conducted on the body of a young man who had died under suspicious circumstances(12). During the Kandyan Kingdom in ancient Ceylon (1593-1815 AD), a death inquiry tribunal existed called “Sakshi Balanda” (meaning “evidence into”). This tribunal was responsible

for investigating suspicious deaths(13). However, there is no evidence to suggest that physicians were involved in these investigations(14).

The British coronial system was established in 1883 AD as an adapted version of the English coroners’ system(15). In 1958, the United States enacted the model Postmortem Act, which delineates the specific categories of deaths that require investigation. This act was the foundation for developing individual state laws pertaining to death investigations(15). Over time, these system changes have continuously been adapted to align with the progress of forensic investigations.

Death investigation systems in different countries

Various death investigation methods have been implemented in different parts of the world, generally varying based on the investigating authority’s jurisdiction. Regardless of the legal jurisdiction of the investigation, autopsies are solely performed by forensic pathologists(16).

a. Coroner System

The coronial investigative system, which traces its origins back to Medieval England, has been adopted in countries that were once under British rule, including Australia, Canada, and some states in America. Sri Lanka adopted the coroner's system in the early 1800s, and unlike in England and Wales, the system has remained mostly unchanged for the past century(17–20).

b. Medical Examiner System

United States of America principally practiced the medical examiner system. Medical examiners are highly skilled professionals, such as Physicians, Pathologists, or Forensic Pathologists, who have legal authority over a specific county or state. They have the ability to launch an official inquiry and thoroughly investigate a death, as well as perform postmortem examinations in certain cases(21).

c. Police Investigation

In India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Middle East, death investigations are conducted through a process called an inquest. The Police carry out these investigations and then report to either the Coroner or Magistrate, depending on the specific circumstances(22,23).

d. Procurator Fiscal System

A procurator fiscal, also known as a district attorney in Continental Europe, the Russian Federation, and Scotland. Scotland and England have distinct legal systems, and specific categories of deaths are examined through fatal accident inquiry [FAI] conducted by a Procurator Fiscal, who also possesses the authority to levy a financial penalty(24)

The Scandinavian approach involves a simultaneous investigation by both the Prosecutor General and the state pathologist(25,26).

Death investigation in Sri Lanka

The current Inquest system in our country is founded upon the Code of Criminal Procedure (CCP) Act No.15 of 1979. The procedural requirements for conducting an inquest, the types of cases that must be

investigated, and the responsibilities and authority of the Inquirer into Sudden Death (ISD) are outlined in Chapters II, III, and XI, as well as sections 369-373 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CCP)(27), and the Penal Code of Sri Lanka 1883 and its subsequent changes (1993, 1995, 2006)(28).

In addition to the legislation, relevant agencies have periodically issued various special circulars to enhance death inquiries.

The Ministry of Justice has issued Circular NO- 04/2007 and No- 03/2004, which provide guidelines on the appointment, payments, and disciplinary control of ISDs(29). Additionally, Circular NO- 03/2008 of the Ministry of Justice outlines procedures for conducting inquests on maternal deaths, deaths from accidents, suicides, deaths from firearm injuries, and deaths where the cause of death is unknown(29). Circular NO- 01/2010 issued by the Ministry of Public Administration and Home Affairs highlights the disbursement of the ISD payments(30). The Ministry of Health has issued Circular No. 01-25/2011, which provides guidelines for conducting post-mortem examinations on maternal deaths. The Ministry of Health has issued Circular No- 01-25/2012, which provides instructions for conducting pediatric autopsies in cases of deaths connected to immunization(31). Official announcement in the Government Gazette on September 23, 2011, outlines the process of recruiting and the required requirements for ISD(32).

Significant rulings made by the Supreme Court. In the case of Seneviratne vs. Attorney General (71 NLR 429), commonly referred to as Dodampe Mudalali's case, Justice Tennakoon highlighted. A magistrate or an inquirer lacks the authority to deliver a verdict at the end of an investigation, and the legislation does not allow the Supreme Court to nullify the conclusions of an inquirer or magistrate(33).

In the legal framework of Sri Lanka, an inquest is carried out either by an Inquirer into Sudden Deaths (ISD) or by a Magistrate. The ISD possesses the authority to compel the attendance of any witness for the purpose of providing testimony and producing any pertinent documents related to the investigation of the deceased. If an individual fails to comply, the ISD has the authority to issue a warrant for the arrest and bring that person before them. The ISD has the authority to impose fines or issue

orders for the imprisonment of individuals who fail to comply with summons(27). The Magistrate carries out investigations into all cases of murder and deaths under suspicious circumstances. Pursuant to subsection 371 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CCP) in Sri Lanka, it is mandated that the magistrate conduct an investigation into deaths that occur while in custody(27).

As per the CCP and other legal regulations, the following fatalities need a request for an Inquest.

1. All cases of natural deaths with unknown causes.
2. Deaths resulting from natural causes, where the cause of death is known, but any suspicion develops.
3. All deaths that occur upon admission at the point of delivery, regardless of the specific circumstances surrounding the death.
4. Accidents encompass several types, such as road traffic accidents, industrial accidents, domestic accidents, aviation accidents, marine accidents, and locomotive accidents.
5. Fatalities resulting from self-inflicted acts of suicide.
6. Fatalities resulting from acts of violence (Homicide).
7. Deaths in custody encompass individuals held in prisons, police custody, both lawful and unlawful detention, mental hospitals, leprosy hospitals, TB hospitals, elder's homes, children's homes, accredited schools, and similar institutions.
8. Mortality resulting from medical, surgical, or anesthetic procedures in the immediate aftermath.
9. Fatality resulting from the introduction of blood, blood products, or a pharmaceutical substance.
10. Mortality resulting from animal bites, specifically caused by rabies or tetanus infections.
11. Deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth
12. Deaths caused by vaccines.

The police officer from the local police station in the vicinity where the dead resided or where the incident leading to their death occurred should be involved. The primary responsibility of a police officer is to introduce

the witnesses and present the evidence in front of the ISD/Magistrate. The inquirer is not obligated to just rely on the witnesses presented by the police officer(2).

Two immediate family members should be present to positively identify the deceased's body. The inquirer possesses the power to bring additional witnesses to an inquest if they believe that these individuals can offer pertinent information regarding the incident or the deceased. Medical practitioners who provided care to the dead can be requested to attend the inquest in order to provide testimony and provide medical records pertaining to the treatment(2).

If the ISD conducting the investigation is content with the evidence provided regarding the deceased person and the reason for their death, they have the authority to hand over the body to the family members after issuing the Inquirer's cause of death certificate. If the available evidence is insufficient to determine the cause of death, the investigator has the authority to request a government medical officer to do a postmortem examination and provide a report on the cause of death. Upon the availability of the postmortem examination report, the inquirer has the authority to hand over the body to the deceased's relatives. The inquirer must also determine the cause of death. In the event that the cause of death is deemed suspicious, it is imperative to notify the Magistrate. After concluding each investigation, the ISD must submit a report to the Magistrate(4).

Deficiencies in the Death Investigation System of Sri Lanka

The Ministry of Justice appoints the ISD. The ISD is usually a layperson with no formal training or experience in the field. The GCE Ordinary Level exam is the minimal educational requirement for appointment as an ISD, and passing it is required. They are not knowledgeable about law or medicine. Hence, they are unable to make wise decisions(29).

ISD/Coroners are not equipped or authorized to make decisions or suggestions regarding risks to the public's health. Furthermore, there is little communication with the epidemiological database concerning healthcare delivery and death rates(4).

Furthermore, the secretary of justice appoints coroners and ISD. Nonetheless, they are often selected on the basis

of political factors and retain political connections that undermine the objectivity of the inquiry procedures(4).

This gives the Coroner/ISD more authority and the unnecessary power to summon doctors and pathologists who are qualified professionals. Negative interactions between the two parties have been observed in the recent past, leading to protracted disagreements that have impeded a comprehensive investigation(34).

On the other hand, there can be conflicts of interest involving particular parties, such as funeral directors, attorneys, and so on.

Way forward

There has been a global trend of transitioning from the coronial death investigation system to a medical examiner system over the years(35). Sri Lanka should contemplate transitioning from the inquest system to the medical examiner system, as the former has numerous deficiencies.

Implementing the medical examiner system in Sri Lanka poses significant challenges. The establishment of it is not an immediate objective; therefore, a gradual approach is necessary. It is prudent to contemplate the prevalent difficulties and the remedies of the nations that have implemented the medical examiner system.

The current group of forensic medical professionals in Sri Lanka, with their advanced training and experience, possess the necessary skills and expertise to carry out death investigations in accordance with legal requirements, undoubtedly surpassing that of an Inquirer into Sudden Death (ISD)/Coroner. With few adjustments to the criminal procedure code, the existing death investigation system can be efficiently transformed into a system that prioritizes the role of the medical examiner. A provision should be made to designate a Forensic medical specialist as a death investigator, granting them the same authority as the current ISD/Coroner. Additionally, the medical examiner can hold an inquest to determine the necessity of an autopsy examination. The medical examiner should be held responsible before the Magistrate for the results of the investigation and post-mortem examination. Undoubtedly, the appointment as a medical examiner entails an extra-legal obligation for the forensic pathologist.

Medical examiners or skilled death scene investigators [24] have the authority to visit the scene of death/houses(36). They can also take over the responsibility of the “Grama Niladhari” - a village officer / ISD in certifying the cause and manner of death in a more scientific manner, thereby avoiding unnecessary delays and expensive investigations.

Conclusion

Despite Sri Lanka’s extensive experience in handling the dead, there are inherent deficiencies and potential for misconduct in death investigations.

It is imperative to transition from the inquest system to a medical examiner system, as the latter is more scientifically rigorous and efficient. Simultaneously, the implementation of the medical examiner system will efficiently save the important time of the involved parties while also significantly alleviating the financial strain associated with death investigations.

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