

WORK FLOW THROUGH THE ORANGE COUNTY TOXICOLOGY LABORATORY

SUMMARY

Without a death certificate, next of kin cannot gain access to the deceased's checking accounts, transfer title to property, or collect on life insurance policies. The bills continue to come in, but often there are no resources with which to pay them, thus adding to the trauma of the family. It is imperative therefore, that the County of Orange provide death certificates in the shortest possible time consistent with high quality and accurate results. Currently, only about 50 percent of all autopsy cases require toxicology studies. The remaining are cleared on a timely basis. The average time taken to produce toxicology reports is about eight weeks at present. The 1999–2000 Orange County Grand Jury recommends that a joint work-flow efficiency study be made by the Orange County Toxicology Laboratory and a qualified outside consultant.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to review the average time taken by the Orange County Toxicology Laboratory to process toxicology requests from the date received to the completion date of the final report. The objective is to reduce the average processing time from eight weeks to four weeks.

METHOD OF STUDY

The Grand Jury:

- Inspected the Orange County Toxicology Laboratory and interviewed representatives of the staff.
- Reviewed accounting reports, charts, graphs, and reports as furnished by the laboratory.
- Visited the San Diego Toxicology Laboratory and interviewed representatives of the staff.

BACKGROUND

The 1999–2000 Orange County Grand Jury has undertaken a study to find the average number of days required to complete toxicology reports as measured from date of receipt. To that end, members of the Grand Jury visited the Orange County Toxicology Laboratory on three occasions. Although the laboratory was impressive and the equipment appears to be state-of-the-art, there did not seem to be a high level of activity on any of the occasions.

Information in the form of charts, graphs, and reports was provided to the Grand Jury. On December 13, 1999, the average time taken to process toxicology reports from date of request to completion was approximately seven weeks. This information was obtained from *Current Pending Cases* published by the Orange County Sheriff-Coroner Department. The average time reported on the May 18, 2000, report was approximately eight weeks.

Letters were sent to representative counties in January 2000 requesting the average time from the request for toxicology screenings to the completion of those tests. Three of the four respondents have lower average test times than does Orange County. The Grand Jury chose San Diego County for comparison purposes.

The Orange County Toxicology Laboratory processes approximately 1,200 Coroner cases each year. The San Diego Toxicology Laboratory processes approximately 3,000 comparable cases each year. (The San Diego Laboratory does the toxicology screening for San Diego County, San Bernardino County, and Imperial County.) The staff of the San Diego Toxicology Laboratory consists of one laboratory manager, five toxicologists, and four student workers. The staff of the Orange County Toxicology Laboratory consists of one senior forensic scientist and eight forensic scientists, which is comparable to the size of the staff of the San Diego County Toxicology Laboratory. San Diego County's average time to completion of tests is four weeks as compared to the aforementioned eight weeks for the Orange County Laboratory, even though the San Diego County annual cases appear to be two-and-one-half times as many as those of the Orange County laboratory.

FINDINGS

In accordance with *California Penal Code* Sections 933 and 933.05, responses are required to all findings. The 1999–2000 Orange County Grand Jury has arrived at the following findings:

1. The Orange County Toxicology Laboratory's average time from receipt of request to completion of toxicology tests is approximately eight weeks and appears to be longer than in comparable counties.

A response to Finding 1 is required from the **Sheriff-Coroner**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In accordance with *California Penal Code* Sections 933 and 933.05, each recommendation must be responded to by the government entity to which it is addressed. These responses are submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court. Based on the findings, the 1999–2000 Orange County Grand Jury recommends that:

1. A joint work-flow efficiency study be conducted by the Orange County Toxicology Laboratory and a qualified outside management consulting firm. The objective of the study should be to reduce the average process time for toxicology reports from eight to four weeks.

A response to Recommendation 1 is required from the **Sheriff-Coroner**.