

THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTOPSY IN MAJOR DISASTERS

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SUMMARY

It is appreciated that there are national and jurisdictional variations in regard to post-mortem dissections following accidental death. The purpose of this paper is to plead that, since there will be nationals of many states involved in an aircraft disaster, there should be a uniform system of forensic investigation on a world wide bases. The justification for this recommendation is illustrated through the investigation of accident causes and through the solution of the many problems relating to the settlement of probate which arise in accidental death.

The causes of accidents which may be discovered by autopsy include crew incapacitation and criminality of all types. The emergency status may also be revealed and the type of accident, particularly whether in a controlled or uncontrolled phase, may become clear.

The medico-legal problems to be resolved include those concerning payment of insurance policies, including the degree of life expectancy, and, especially the disposal of estates when members of a family apparently die together. The resulting payments to beneficiaries may be quite different depending on the quality of the autopsy.

These investigations are complementary to, and do not interfere with, the identification process but they are time consuming and expensive.

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It is only in those countries in which the Anglo-Saxon jurisdiction persists that autopsy is a commonplace following accidental death. Within those legislations based on Roman law, emphasis is upon the privacy of the individual and, by and large, post-mortem dissection is regarded as an infringement of that privacy (!). As a result, there are very large areas of the world in which internal dissections in the assumed conditions of accidental death would be positively disapproved; if we add to this a possible shortage of manpower and religious or other societal objections to autopsy in areas which are still dominated by Anglo-Saxon medico-legal thinking, it is apparent that the chances of a victim of an accident involving an airliner coming to post-mortem dissection are, on a world basis, very low.