

**Office of the Chief Medical Examiner**  
**Annual Report 2023-24**

## **Message from the Chief Medical Examiner**

I hereby present the 2023-24 Annual Report of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME). This report was prepared in accordance with the provisions of the **Transparency and Accountability Act**. My signature below is indicative of my accountability for the results reported.

As a Category 3 Government Entity, the OCME is required to report on activities carried out in the last fiscal year. The information presented in this report outlines the activities of the Office from April 1, 2023 to March 31, 2024.



**Nebojsa Denic, M.D., M.S., PhD, F.R.C.P.C.**  
Chief Medical Examiner  
Province of Newfoundland and Labrador

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## Overview

The **Fatalities Investigations Act** (the Act) states that the OCME is responsible to the Minister of Justice and Public Safety for the operation of the Act in relation to reporting, investigating and recording of deaths.

Approximately 850 deaths per year come to the attention of the OCME as considered reportable under the Act. Deaths which are considered reportable are those which are due to violence, accident or suicide, improper or negligent treatment, are sudden and unexpected or occur when an individual is not under active medical care at the time of death or when the cause of death cannot be determined. Deaths of this nature account for approximately 14 per cent of the deaths within Newfoundland and Labrador. The OCME reviewed the death certificates and approved 4,523 cremations in 2023-24. This represents approximately 74 per cent of all deaths in the province.

The OCME is also responsible for appointing physicians to act as Medical Examiners. In addition to the Chief Medical Examiner, there are two Medical Examiners (forensic pathologists). Administrative support is provided by an Administrative Officer I, and a Stenographer II, both of whom are supervised by the Manager of Corporate Services. In 2023-24 the OCME was successful in recruiting one Medical Examiner Investigator. A second Medical Examiner Investigator position remains vacant.

There are also six rural pathologists handling non-complicated cases within the Provincial Health Authority. The work of these pathologists is directed by and subject to review by the Chief Medical Examiner, and their work is limited to cases which are non-criminal or suspicious in nature. Assistance in the investigation is provided by police officers employed by the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary (RNC) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), who are, by virtue of their office, medical examiner investigators.

The OCME is located in the Health Sciences Centre, Prince Philip Parkway, St. John's. The OCME is an independent entity under the Department of Justice and Public Safety. However, cooperation with multiple external agencies, including law enforcement and health organizations, is essential to the success of its operation. Files related to the investigations conducted by the OCME are presently stored at the OCME office, at the Health Sciences Centre and at the Provincial Records Centre, located at 190 East White Hills Rd, in St. John's.

## Mandate

Pursuant to Section 3 of the **Fatalities Investigation Act**, some main responsibilities of the Chief Medical Examiner include:

- the administration of the Act in relation to the reporting, investigating and recording of deaths;

- the appointment of physicians as medical examiners and the supervision of the performance of medical examiners and pathologists performing medicolegal investigative duties;
- the appointment of medical investigators;
- the appointment of an Acting Chief Medical Examiner who may act in the place of the Chief Medical Examiner;
- the development and maintenance of facilities that may be required for the purpose of the Act; and,
- the education of persons required to perform functions under the Act.

The OCME does not present separate Lines of Business as they are reflected in the Mandate.

## **Vision**

To provide evidence-based death investigation services for the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, in accordance with the **Fatalities Investigations Act**, collaborate with external entities in ethical research activities conducted in the interest of public safety.

## **Highlights and Partnerships**

In addition to post-mortem examination and autopsies, the Chief Medical Examiner reviews non-fatal trauma cases for police and Crown Attorneys to interpret and determine the mechanism of trauma. The OCME also reviews all requests for cremations, as well as the transportation of remains in and out of the province. The OCME also receives many requests during the year to analyze bones found by citizens or police throughout the province. These bones/remains are analyzed to determine whether they are human in origin.

The OCME provides statistics to various organizations such as the Public Health Agency of Canada, Statistics Canada, the Red Cross, and the Lifesaving Society, regarding specific cause or manner of death, in addition to responding to numerous media requests throughout the year. The Chief Medical Examiner also sits on the Child Death Review Committee and the Atlantic Domestic Homicide Review Network. The OCME is affiliated with Memorial University as it provides training to medical students and residents, as well as a death scene investigation course for RNC and RCMP officers.

## Report on Activities

### Issue 1: Compliance with Fatalities Investigations Act

The OCME responds to reportable deaths as defined by the **Fatalities Investigations Act**. The response depends upon the circumstances of death, examination of the scene, the deceased's health and the level of health care at the time of death, and witness statements. Some cases may require the assistance of a Forensic Anthropologist. The objective and indicators for the OCME are consistent for the 2023-26 planning period and the associated indicators will be reported on for each year of planning period.

**Objective 1:** By March 31, 2024, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner will have responded to deaths that are reported in accordance with the **Fatalities Investigations Act**.

Indicators	2023-24 Results *
Conducted medical examiner file reviews	874
Ordered and/or conducted external post-mortem examinations, as appropriate	145
Ordered and/or conducted medicolegal autopsies, as appropriate	247
Recorded and reported on causes and manners of death	846

\* These numbers reflect closed case statistics from the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador fiscal year, from April 1, 2023 to March 31, 2024, rather than the calendar year.

### Issue 2: Development of new OCME facility

In 2017, a report titled “A Report Concerning the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner”, outlined significant deficiencies within the OCME and made 65 recommendations for improvement, including that a new OCME facility be found. The OCME then participated in a pre-design analysis, including a 20-year functional program, of the office. The functional program identified current and future service delivery assumptions, design considerations, staffing estimates, a schedule of accommodation that identified all required spaces and a high-level concept plan. This initial analysis was completed by the then Eastern Health Authority (now under Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services) in 2018 and included a class D cost estimate based on the functional program and a preliminary phasing plan. A review and revision of the functional plan has been proposed in March of 2024, which would incorporate a new morgue complex. The focus of the OCME will be consistent for each fiscal year, including 2023-24.

**Objective 2:** By March 31, 2024, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner will have collaborated with representatives of the new provincial health authority on the development and renovation of a new dedicated OCME autopsy suite and office space

within the Health Sciences Centre including receiving approval for an updated functional program.

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>2023-24 Results</b>
Met with Health Authority and consultant representatives regarding functional infrastructure planning	Met with Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services and its consultant to discuss additional structural changes proposed by OCME for the floor plan.
Received phasing plan and critical path timelines for infrastructure development as part of an updated functional program.	Received a proposal for a new location for the OCME within the Health Sciences Centre. The floor plan requires modification and approvals before timelines can be established.
Begin renovation of new OCME space.	No new start date for the OCME renovation has been established due to the new location proposal from Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services. Discussions are on-going in the 2024-25 fiscal year.

## **Opportunities and Challenges**

In 2016, the OCME underwent an operational review. The report was released in early 2017. The purpose of the review was to identify operational deficiencies and make appropriate recommendations to correct them. As of March 31, 2023, 50 of the 65 recommendations are complete or are in progress. Outstanding recommendations related to infrastructure and a data management system continue to be addressed with the relevant partners to bring to completion.

Since a Public Health Officer from the Public Health Agency of Canada has been embedded at the OCME, the OCME has been providing historical and real-time data on reportable deaths in the province to the federal and provincial governments. This data includes but is not limited to drug and alcohol-related deaths as well as suicides.

Currently, the office is strongly considering taking on all forensic autopsy services from the entire province and centralizing it to OCME in St. John's. The OCME is also considering taking over non-forensic autopsy services in the eastern zone of Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services. This is being considered with the goal of quality improvement in the hospital autopsy service and teaching of graduate and post-graduate medical students. This initiative is conditional on the recruitment of an additional Forensic Pathologist and two Autopsy Assistants.

## Financial Statements

Expenditure and revenue figures included in this document are unaudited and based on public information provided in the Report on the Program Expenditures and Revenues of the Consolidated Revenue Fund for the Year Ended 31 March 2024 (unaudited). The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner is not required to provide a separate audited financial statement.

### 2.3.04. OFFICE OF THE CHIEF MEDICAL EXAMINER

	Actuals	Estimates	
		Original Budget	\$
01. Salaries.....	1,050,230	1,093,800	
Operating Accounts:			
<i>Employee Benefits</i> .....	4,950	9,000	
<i>Transportation and Communications</i> .....	10,689	13,800	
<i>Supplies</i> .....	9,577	14,500	
<i>Professional Services</i> .....	256,989	330,000	
<i>Purchased Services</i> .....	1,160,027	451,000	
<i>Property, Furnishings and Equipment</i> .....	1,290	2,500	
02. Operating Accounts.....	1,443,522	820,800	
<b>Total: Office of the Chief Medical Examiner...</b>	<b>2,493,752</b>	<b>1,914,600</b>	

## Contact us

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