



CHIEF CORONER

Frequently Asked Questions about the Chief Coroner and the Coroner Service

Question Who is the Chief Coroner?

Answer HH Judge Peter Thornton QC

Q What does the Chief Coroner do?

A He heads the coroner service of England and Wales and promotes and develops the Government's 2013 coroner reforms including the reduction of delays in completing inquests. He provides training and guidance for coroners and coroners' officers, makes formal orders under the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, sits in the High Court on inquest appeals (such as Hillsborough and Duggan), has special responsibility for military death cases, and reports annually to Parliament through the Lord Chancellor.

Q Does the Chief Coroner's responsibility extend to Scotland or Northern Ireland?

A No.

Q How many coroners are there?

A There are 380 coroners: 91 senior coroners, 9 area coroners and 380 assistant coroners. England and Wales are divided up into 96 coroner areas, such as the Cumbria coroner area and the West London area, each with a senior coroner leading a team of coroners.

Q What do coroners do?

A Coroners are independent judicial office holders (like judges) who investigate certain deaths. When a coroner receives a report of a body within his/her geographical area the coroner will investigate any death which is violent or unnatural or the cause of which is unknown or which occurs in prison, police custody or other state detention.

Q If a member of my family dies will the death be reported to the coroner?

A Not in most cases. It will not be reported to the coroner where a hospital doctor or GP is able to certify that the death was from natural causes and the local registrar of births and deaths is satisfied with the information.

Q How do I register a death?

B Full details are given on the Government website at <https://www.gov.uk/register-a-death>

Q What does the coroner investigate?

A Where the coroner has a duty to investigate (see above) he/she is required by law to establish (where possible) the medical cause of death and to answer four questions: who died, where and when did they die and how did they come by their death.

Q What is an inquest?

A An inquest is a public court hearing (in the coroner's court) in which the coroner – or jury where appropriate – establishes the answers to the above questions and comes to a conclusion about the death. Permitted conclusions include amongst others natural causes, accident, road traffic collision or suicide. The findings and conclusion of the inquest will be recorded on the Record of Inquest.

Q Is an inquest required in all cases?

A No. Where the coroner establishes at an early stage, sometimes after a post-mortem examination (autopsy), that the death is from natural causes, there may be no need for further investigation.

Q If there is an inquest will there be a jury?

A Only in a few cases (less than 2% of all inquests), such as a possible suicide in prison.

Q Will there be a post-mortem examination (autopsy) in every case?

A No. The coroner decides in each case whether a post-mortem examination is necessary as an aid to establishing the medical cause of death. The coroner may use other aids such as toxicology testing.

Q Do coroners carry out post-mortem examinations?

A No. Despite what is shown in some TV dramas, post-mortem examinations are conducted by medically qualified pathologists not coroners.

Q What qualifications do coroners have?

A Since 2013 newly appointed coroners must have the five year judicial eligibility qualification (like all judges) which requires five years of legal practice or part-time

judicial practice. Coroners appointed before 2013 could be lawyers or doctors; a few are both.

Q How do you become a coroner?

A If you have the necessary qualifications (as above) you can apply to become an assistant coroner when a vacancy is advertised by a local authority. All appointments are made by local authorities and require the consent of the Chief Coroner and the Lord Chancellor.

Q How do I get further information?

A The Ministry of Justice publishes a 56 page *Guide to coroner services*
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guide-to-coroner-services-and-coroner-investigations-a-short-guide>