

# Police not prepared for death investigations

March 16 2015, by Rob Kidd

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Professor Belinda Carpenter looked at the challenges police face during death investigations.

Police are ill-equipped to investigate non-criminal deaths and face a challenge to avoid re-traumatising bereaved families as well as emotionally protecting themselves, according to QUT research.

Investigating death: the emotional and cultural challenges for police found it was usually junior officers sent to sudden death investigations and tasked with not only gathering evidence, but also comforting [family members](#) and explaining the coronial process.

The research has been published in the journal of *Policing and Society*.

"The vast majority of deaths are neither suspicious nor violent. For example, of the 28,563 recorded deaths in Queensland in 2011/12, 4,461 were reported to the coroner," lead researcher Professor Belinda Carpenter, from QUT's School of Justice, said.

"Police are responsible for investigating both suspicious and [violent deaths](#) like homicide as well as non-suspicious, violent deaths like accidents and suicides."

Professor Carpenter said police were often not prepared for "very confronting" death scenes.

"Most police remember turning up to their first death scene as it can be an affront to all the senses and is often a traumatic experience," she said.

The research found police do "emotion work" during death investigations to ensure they can gather the information needed without becoming emotionally overwhelmed, for example through "gallows humour".

"This tendency for professional detachment constrains their capacity for tact and compassion toward the grieving family and can mean families are asked to make important decisions while still in shock," Professor Carpenter said.

"Police admit these are situations outside their comfort zone. Comforting someone who has just unexpectedly lost their partner or child, for example, is very different from apprehending a criminal."

Professor Carpenter said junior police were usually sent to death investigations but were expected to do more than just the complex paperwork involved.

"They are the eyes and ears of the coroner, it is a really important job," she said.

"They have to get information from grieving family members to pass on to the coroner but also comfort family members and, in some situations, explain to already emotional family members what an autopsy is.

"Young officers may not have the confidence or hardening to handle such situations or ask potentially upsetting questions, and coroners indicated investigation paperwork was often sloppily or inadequately completed."

There were added complications with investigating deaths from different cultures, particularly Indigenous Australians, and Muslim and Jewish people, who often had different beliefs about autopsy procedures, and, in some instances, a historically hostile relationship with police.

"Police are the first to acknowledge death investigations are uncomfortable for them and they recognise junior officers are probably not the best people to be conducting investigations," Professor Carpenter said.

"But, despite the concerns raised by police and coronial personnel, police are the only profession logistically available across the state 24 hours a day.

"So it is essential police are giving adequate training, including cultural training, to deal with these traumatic scenes effectively and compassionately.

"Cultural liaison officers play a crucial role but there are not enough of them to be at every death scene."

The researchers are developing an e-resource which takes [police](#), coronial professionals and bereaved families through the coronial process and answers common questions.

**More information:** "Investigating death: the emotional and cultural challenges for police." *Policing and Society* [DOI: 10.1080/10439463.2015.1016024](#)

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