

## **MEDICAL EXAMINERS COMMISSION MEETING**

Omni Orlando at ChampionsGate  
1500 Masters Boulevard  
ChampionsGate, Florida 33896  
July 19, 2023 10:00 AM EDT

Commission Chairman Barbara C. Wolf, M.D., called the meeting of the Medical Examiners Commission to order at **10:06 AM**. She advised those in the audience that the meetings of the Medical Examiners Commission are open to the public and that members of the public will be allowed five minutes to speak. She then welcomed everyone to the meeting and asked Commission members, staff, and audience members to introduce themselves.

### **Commission members present:**

Barbara C. Wolf, M.D., Districts 5 & 24 Medical Examiner  
Nick Cox, J.D., Statewide Prosecutor, Office of the Attorney General  
Robin Giddens Sheppard, L.F.D., Funeral Director  
Kenneth T. Jones, State Registrar, Department of Health  
Hon. Charlie Cofer, J.D., Public Defender, 4<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit  
Joshua Stephany, M.D., Districts 9 & 25 Medical Examiner  
Hon. Amira Fox, J.D., State Attorney, 20<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit  
Hon. Robert "Bob" Johnson, Santa Rosa County Sheriff

### **Commission staff present:**

Brett Kirkland, Ph.D.	Megan Neel
Chris Bufano, J.D.	Ashley Williams

### **District Medical Examiners present:**

Jon R. Thogmartin, M.D. (District 2, 6, & 23)	Patricia A. Aronica, M.D. (District 19)
Russell S. Vega, M.D. (District 12)	Deanna Oleske, M.D. (District 1)
Thomas M. Coyne, M.D., Ph.D. (District 8)	Sajid S. Qaiser, M.D. (District 18)

### **Other District personnel present:**

Bruce Goldberger, Ph. D. (District 8)	Penny Fulton (District 22)
Karla Orozco (District 7)	Kailee Imperatore, M.D. (District 6)
Thomas Steinkamp (District 17)	Kelly Root (District 1)
Wendy Lavezzi, M.D. (District 5 & 24)	Brittany L. Glad, D.O. (District 4)
Natalia Belova, M.D. (District 15)	Damon Breton (District 6)
Erin Ely, M.D. (District 17)	

### **Guests present:**

Tinene Alter (NMS Labs)	Alexis DiBlanda (FDOH)
James Rosa (Lions Eye Institute)	Diana Prieto (FDOH)
Merredith Touns (LifeNet)	Chris Boden (Citizen)
Teresa Matthew (FDOH)	Sherry Groover (Citizen)
Christina During (FDOH)	

**A MOTION WAS MADE, SECONDED, AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY FOR THE COMMISSION TO APPROVE THE AGENDA.**

**A MOTION WAS MADE, SECONDED, AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY FOR THE COMMISSION TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE MAY 19, 2023 MEDICAL EXAMINERS COMMISSION MEETING.**

## **ISSUE NUMBER 1: INFORMATIONAL ITEMS**

- Status Report: DME Appointment Ratifications: Bureau Chief Brett Kirkland, Ph.D., advised that a letter was sent to the Governor's Appointment Office confirming the ratifications of all appointments and reappointments of District Medical Examiners by the Commission. Dr. Kirkland advised that we are currently awaiting appointments from the Governor's Appointment Office. Mr. Cox inquired if the hiring of new pathologists has improved since the Commission has voted to appoint and reappoint all of the District Medical Examiners. Dr. Wolf advised the real issue with the medical examiner vacancies is the national shortage of forensic pathologists and the fact that many offices are not able to offer competitive salaries to compete with nationwide offices.
- District 2 Medical Examiner Vacancy: Dr. Joshua informed the Commission that there were 3 candidates who have applied but 1 candidate had withdrawn. The District 2 search committee decided to reconvene in the fall to allow more time for candidates to apply. Dr. Stephany advised that Dr. Jon Thogmartin will continue to provide assistance until the vacancy is filled.
- 2022 Interim Drug Report: Mrs. Megan Neel informed the Commission that the 2022 Interim Drug Report was published to the MEC website on July 10, 2023. Mrs. Neel advised that if you like a copy, to contact her and she will email a copy.
- 2022 Annual Drug Report: Mrs. Megan Neel informed the Commission that all data has been received and sent to QAC for review.
- 2022 Annual Workload Report: Mrs. Megan Neel advised that she has received data from all but one district. Once received, all data will be complied and published.
- 2022 Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grant Program Status Update: Mrs. Ashley Williams informed the Commission that Bureau of Justice Assistance has released the funding for the 2022 Coverdell Grant and the awarded packages were sent out electronically on April 22, 2023. Mrs. Williams advised that districts cannot be reimbursed until the completed MOUs have been signed and returned to the grant manager.
- 2023 Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grant Program Status Update: Mrs. Ashley Williams informed the Commission that eleven districts have sent proposals for the 2023 Coverdell Grant. The M. E. allotment total is \$51,440. Mrs. Williams advised that the funds are not expected to be released until 2024.

## **ISSUE NUMBER 2: NOMINATION FOR DISTRICT 22 MEDICAL EXAMINER**

- New District 22 Medical Examiner: Honorable Amira Fox informed the Commission that the District 22 search committee has completed the search and will recommending Dr. Russell Vega as the District Medical Examiner.

**WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION, MR. COX MADE A MOTION TO APPROVE THE RECOMMENDATION OF DR. RUSSELL VEGA TO THE GOVERNOR'S APPOINTMENT OFFICE FOR THE DISTRICT 22 MEDICAL EXAMINER. THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY TO RECOMMEND DR. RUSSELL VEGA TO THE GOVERNOR'S OFFICE AS THE DISTRICT 22 MEDICAL EXAMINER.**

### **ISSUE NUMBER 3: “DEATH, DIGNITY AND JEWISH CULTURE” PRESENTED BY RABBI MARK ROSENBERG**

- Dr. Barbara Wolf advised that unfortunately Rabbi Mark Rosenberg was unable to attend, therefore the presentation will be rescheduled at a later date.

### **ISSUE NUMBER 4: UNIDENTIFIED DECEASED INITIATIVE**

Mrs. Williams reported the following success stories from District 17.

- On February 18, 1984, an unidentified white female was found decomposed in a canal in Davie, Florida. Her death was ruled a homicide and fingerprints were searched with negative results. In 2006, DNA was submitted and entered into CODIS. In 2022, genetic genealogy was performed which led law enforcement to a possible family member. Detectives collected DNA from a possible daughter of the unidentified decedent. In May of 2023, the DNA comparison identified the decedent as a 1984 missing 23-year-old female. The decedent's family was notified of the positive identification and law enforcement is actively investigating the case.
- On December 19, 1998, an unidentified female was found in the Everglades in Western Broward County. Her death was ruled a homicide and fingerprints were searched with negative results. In 2007, DNA was submitted and in 2013 fingerprints were resent to FDLE with negative results. In 2022, genetic genealogy was performed which led law enforcement to a possible family member. Detectives collected DNA from a possible son of the unidentified decedent. In March 2023, the DNA comparison identified the decedent as a 1998 missing 41-year-old female. The decedent's family was notified of the positive identification and law enforcement is actively investigating the case.
- On March 25, 2023, an unidentified male was found partially skeletonized wrapped in a sheet off a dirt road in a remote area of the Miccosukee Indian Reservation in western Broward County. At the time of discover, the decedent was unknown and there were no leads on his identification. On March 26, 2023, Broward Medical Examiner staff received a phone call from a concerned citizen looking for her friend who went missing around suspicious circumstances. Medical Examiner staff obtained the physical description details of the missing person and compared them to our unidentified cases. The information provided by the caller had similarities to the unidentified remains found on March 25, 2023. Medical Examiner staff notified the lead law enforcement agency of the call and started to gather further information to confirm the identification. On March 28, 2023, positive identification was made by antemortem radiographs and matching serial numbers on implanted hardware. The decedent's family was notified of the death and law enforcement is actively investigating the case.

Mrs. Williams reported the following success story from District 19.

- On January 20, 2023, fully skeletonized incomplete skeletal remains were discovered in a wooded area adjacent to a retention pond in Fort Pierce Florida. The remains were examined at the District 19 Medical Examiner's Office by Dr. Patricia Aronica and subsequently evaluated by Forensic Odontologist Dr. Walter Zoller and the C.A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory. Initial evaluation determined the remains to be those of a male individual, that likely identified as White/Caucasian, in his 40's to 50's by anthropological assessment and average age of 25.67 by odontologic assessment. There was no perimortem trauma. Evidence of healed right shoulder stabilization surgery was noted. Time since death was estimated to be at least a year to a few years. No cause of death could be established. The case report was finalized pending DNA profile establishment on April 26, 2023, and the individual was entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database. Two molar teeth were sent to the Pinellas County Forensic Laboratory in order to establish a DNA profile for CODIS. On June 2, 2023, a Type I association was made between this case and a convicted offender database out of Pennsylvania. He was positively identified as a White/Caucasian male with a

birthdate of 09/01/1991. Notification was made by Fort Pierce Police Department to his mother who reported that she had not heard from her son in two years. His last known residence was known to be an extended stay motel in Fort Pierce, Florida. He was incarcerated in Pennsylvania for 8 years. During that time, he was known to have had shoulder surgery. He was reported to have been suicidal for much of his life and known to use illicit substances. The cause and manner of death both remain undetermined at this time.

#### **ISSUE NUMBER 5: EMERGING DRUGS**

Bruce Goldberger, Ph.D., provided the Commission with an update on current drug trends. Illicitly manufactured fentanyl continues to be frequently identified in decedents. Polysubstance use with fentanyl is common and includes cocaine and/or methamphetamine along with other substances associated with ingestion such as xylazine. Dr. Goldberger advise that in the north east region of the United States, there is a strong connection between xylazine and skin lesions. Alpha- PiHP, a cathinone, has become prevalent in Broward County. There was also an increasing prevalence of N,N-Dimethylpentylone in decedents as well as reports of the designer benzodiazepine, flualprazolam, in decedents in the Gainesville area. Dr. Goldberger advised that he does not have an update on data from the OD2A (Overdose Data to Action), he was hoping to have a report regarding the funding for labs but advised all offices were given the opportunity to participate in receiving funding for months of May and June, and June and July. Dr. Goldberger encouraged districts to participate in the program to receive those funds. Dr. Goldberger also noted that FROST (Florida drug-related outcomes surveillance and tracking system) will be updated shortly with the interim drug data. Furthermore, Dr. Goldberger informed the Commission that the toxicology laboratory directors meeting has expanded to include directors from DUI labs, the Poison Control Center of Jacksonville, and representatives from the Department of Health. Directors and representatives met on Monday, July 10, 2023, and continue to provide valuable information on emerging drug trends. Mr. Ken Jones advised that looking at the OD2A grant he noticed that there were still some districts not utilizing the funds and asked if the Florida Department of Health can assist the districts with utilizing the funding. Mr. Jones advised the districts that if they are encountering issues with the city or county budgets in utilizing the OD2A funds, to contact him and he will work with them on rectifying the issues. Dr. Wolf recommended that districts be contacted to inquire why the OD2A funds are not being utilized.

#### **ISSUE NUMBER 6: OTHER BUSSINESS**

- Fatality Management Response Plan Update: Dr. Brett Kirkland informed the Commission of an update made to the State of Florida Fatality Management Response Plan of the Florida Medical Examiners Commission. Dr. Kirkland advised that on page 22, section K, Progress Reports and Public Information, states that daily reporting to the Medical Examiners Commission during a disaster event involves reporting all confirmed disaster-related deaths to include name, age, race, sex, and a brief synopsis. However, the Medical Examiners Commission has never asked for the names of decedents as this may compromise next-of-kin notification. Mr. Cox inquired if it was inadvertently put into the Florida Fatality Management Response Plan or if the Medical Examiners Commission has ever acquired the name of decedents of fatality. Dr. Kirkland advised that as far as record shows, the Medical Examiners Commission has never asked for the names of decedents to be reported. Mr. Charlie Cofer inquired how the Medical Examiners Commission can assure that there is not a duplicate. Dr. Wolf advised that at the time the fatality is submitted, other identifying factors are included, such as age, race, sex, county in which it occurred, a brief synopsis and a Medical Examiner's case number. Mr. Ken Jones also advised that the data received from the Medical Examiners Commission is crossed referenced with the data received to the Florida Department of Health Vital Statistics.

**WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION, MR. COX MADE A MOTION TO AMEND THE FATALITY MANAGEMENT RESPONSE PLAN TO REPLACE "NAME" WITH "ME CASE NUMBER". THE**

**MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY THAT THE FATALITY MANAGEMENT RESPONSE PLAN WILL BE AMENDED TO REPLACE “NAME” WITH “ME CASE NUMBER”.**

- Medical Examiner LIMS Surveillance Survey: Dr. Brett Kirkland informed the Commission of potential grant funding through the Department of Health in regards to modernizing the Laboratory Information Management System (LIMS) software within the medical examiner offices to establish a centralized reporting system. Dr. Kirkland advised that this is in the informational stage and he will be coordinating with the Department of Health to send out a survey to the medical examiner offices inquiring about the LIMS software that they use, the scope in which it is used, and if they would be interested in adopting a statewide LIMS software for centralized reporting.
- 2024 FAME Educational Conference: Dr. Goldberger announced that FAME will be celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> year at the 2024 FAME Educational Conference. Dr. Goldberger reported that it is scheduled to be held July 17-19, 2024 at the Westin Sarasota in Sarasota, Florida. The event will be hosted by the District 22 Medical Examiner Dr. Russell Vega.
- A member of the audience spoke to the Commission regarding their experience with a transport company following the death of their child. While transport companies are outside the authority of the Commission, Commission members reiterated the importance of communicating with contractors who support operations to better serve the religious needs of families.

**With no further business to come before the Commission, the meeting was adjourned at 10:54 A.M.**