**Evidence Collection and Handling**

A systematic and consistent approach will be followed in the process of collecting and preserving evidence during each investigation. The staff of the Union County Coroner Office will adhere to established standards during the collection and retention of evidence to ensure the credibility of evidence in subsequent legal proceedings. Standards for documenting chain of custody will be followed for all evidence, including specimens collected for toxicology.

Definition of Evidence-items will include but not limited to clothing; personal effects, firearms, bullets, bullet fragments, hair, fibers, medications, drugs or drug paraphernalia or any other item the investigator deems necessary for the investigation.

**Procedures:**

1. Chain of custody must be documented for all collected items of evidence.
2. The Autopsy permit, Personal Effects, Evidence, Toxicology and Laboratory Service Request and/or Chain of Custody forms will be used to document items that have been received, collected, released, or held as evidence.
3. Evidence and specimens obtained during postmortem procedures must be tagged and placed in appropriate packaging. Swabs, bloodstained items, or other moisture-laden materials should be dried before packaging in paper bags.
   1. Each packaged evidence item will contain the coroner case number, the name of the deceased, retrieval date and who collected the evidence along with location of evidence where collected.
      1. A packaged evidence item will contain a brief description of the evidence on the package exterior.
      2. Labels will be used for labeling the evidence package.
   2. The investigator will verify the contents of each evidence package by placing their initials on the package exterior.
   3. Each evidence bag, container, box, etc. which is used to store any evidence item will be properly secured.

**Forms**

* 1. Property Effects Form
     1. Used for documenting items of clothing and description, jewelry, pocket contents and other personal effects of a deceased person.
     2. Unless held for evidentiary purposes, all articles of clothing will be released to the designated funeral home with the body for subsequent release to family members as appropriate.
     3. Personal effects held as evidence will be marked” Evidence Item #” section of the Property Effects form.
     4. In cases where personal effects are retained as evidence, the Chain of Custody section on the Evidence form will also be completed and the item(s) will be sequentially numbered.

**Evidence Form**

* 1. Items of evidentiary value collected at the time of the autopsy, not already documented on the Personal Effects or Toxicology Form, will be documented on the Evidence Form.
     1. The Assigned investigator will ensure completion of the Evidence Form.
        1. Multiple items must be numbered as sequential item numbers and correspond to evidence packaging.
        2. The Chain of Custody section on the evidence form will be used to indicate the release or retention of evidence items. Evidence items may be released to law enforcement officers on the same day of the investigation and the person receiving the evidence will sign the appropriate section of the Evidence Form.
        3. Retained items of evidence will be placed and secured in the evidence room at the Union County Coroner Office. Items held as evidence will be entered in RMS. The RMS label will indicate a brief description of the evidence, name of the decedent, name of the person placing the evidence in the locker, the date and time the evidence was stored in the locker, and the coroner case number.

**Chain of Custody Form – General Use**

* 1. A standard Chain of Custody form will be used to document the receipt of evidence or the transfer of stored/retained evidence that may not be documented on the Evidence form.
     1. Items such as body fluid specimens and/or solid tissue transferred from Union County Coroner Office to laboratories, consultants and other agencies will be documented on the Chain of Custody form.

**Evidence Disposition**

* 1. Items of clothing and personal effects that can be released to the designated funeral director, only upon authorization from the Union County Coroner Office.
  2. Items of clothing and personal effects of evidentiary value to law enforcement may be released to law enforcement when indicated by the assigned investigator of the Union County Coroner Office.
  3. Evidence held relevant to a homicide investigation will ultimately be released to the investigating law enforcement agency for final disposition.
  4. Temporary Storage Lockers
     1. The Union County Sheriff’s Office maintains the key for the temporary storage lockers and the main storage area for evidence.
     2. The Union County Sheriff’s Office is responsible for removing evidence from the temporary storage lockers, ensuring proper documentation procedures have been followed and placing the evidence into the main evidence storage area. Access to the main evidence cabinet is limited to the administrator or designee.
     3. Evidence will be maintained until it is needed for legal proceedings, until it is released to law enforcement or until it can be appropriately disposed of when the case is signed out.
     4. Evidence will be retained for a period of up to 90 days past the date of the final autopsy report.
     5. Bullets and fragments of ammunition will be destroyed only after providing written notice to the law enforcement agency of jurisdiction. The law enforcement agency will be provided an opportunity to receive the evidence or object to the destruction.
     6. Medications may be destroyed before the case is closed if the prosecuting attorney or law enforcement does not object to the destruction.
     7. Retained items of evidence will be held longer than the standard 90-day period past the final date of the autopsy report, if written notice has been received from a family member, insurance company or another legal representative.
        1. The written notice must indicate the need for the retention and/or analysis of the evidence item(s).
        2. The assigned investigator will notify the prosecuting attorney or law enforcement when a request has been received to retain evidence.
  5. If no written notice has been received to retain items of evidence past the 90-day retention period as described above, the investigator will facilitate the final disposition of the evidence by one of the following methods:
     1. Disposal in bio-medical waste
     2. Sharps containers
     3. Trash bin
     4. Release to appropriate law enforcement agency
     5. Live ammunition will be released to law enforcement. The destruction/final disposition of evidence items will be witnessed by an investigator of the Union County Coroner Office or law enforcement personal. Final disposition will be indicated on the Evidence form or a separate Evidence Disposition form.
     6. Judges’ authorization.

**SC R I P T I O N ME D I C A T I O N S**

**4b: PRESCRIPTION MEDICATIONS - GENERAL**

This Standard Operating Guide covers all aspects of the Coroner Investigator/coroner’s involvement with medications from finding them on the scene to their ultimate disposal. Prescription medications found on a death scene can offer many clues about the decedent’s medical history, compliance in administering those medications and the name or names of healthcare providers.

**Medications at the Scene**

The Coroner Investigator/Coroner will encounter medications prescribed to the decedent, medications prescribed to others in the household, medications for unrelated individuals as well as over-the-counter medications. The Coroner Investigator shall make every effort to locate and secure all prescription medications that belong to the decedent. Prescription containers should be observed for approximate expected balance of the medication base on prescription fill date, dosage instruction and the date of death. The names of the various prescriptions should be noted and compared to the medical history reported by next of kin or other bystanders at a scene. Prescriptions should be packaged and taken from the scene by the Coroner Investigator. Those medications shall be accurately counted and reported on a Medication Log and made part of the case folder.

If the Coroner Investigator sees indications that this might be an overdose death and there are medications prescribed to other members of the household that the decedent had access to the Coroner Investigator shall work with law enforcement to obtain a consent to search or ask them for assistance in obtaining a search warrant. Prescription containers should be observed for approximate expected balance of the medication base on prescription fill date, dosage instruction and the date of death. If the death appears to be related to overuse of medications, those medications must not be removed from the scene but must be counted for reporting purposes. Clear images of the medication label should be taken. This information shall be included on the Medication Log.

Medications not belonging to either the decedent or any household member are found they should be turned over to law enforcement.

The Coroner Investigator should make note of any over-the-counter medications for the Report of Death. Holistic or natural remedies should be noted as well.

**Reconciling Medications**

All medications removed from a death scene shall be inventoried and recorded on a Medication Log. Irregularities should be acknowledged in the “Notes” section of the log. Medications should be reconciled prior to completing the Report of Death in order that the Coroner Investigator gains a more complete knowledge of all the scene circumstances. Medications taken from a scene shall be securely maintained always and be delivered to the Union County Coroner’s Office evidence room at the earliest convenience.

Information to include in the Medication Log:

* + - Name of medication
    - Rx number
    - Date of prescription
    - Prescribed to
    - Physician name
    - Name of pharmacy
    - Dose instructions
    - Quantity prescribed
    - Amount of medication remaining

**Ohio Automated Rx Reporting System (OARRS)**

Consider comparing the prescribing doctor with the pharmacy medication list for inconsistencies.

**Retention of Medications**

Medications shall be maintained in a locking device approved by the Union County Coroner. Medications shall be logged in on a form approved by the Union County Coroner. The Prosecuting Attorney will approve any disposal of medications

**Disposal of Medications**

Once the retention period has expired, medications must be disposed. All medications shall be compared to the log. Any discrepancies must be immediately brought to the attention of the Union County Coroner.

Medication disposal shall follow the following guidelines published by the Office of National Drug Control Policy:

1. Wear proper personal protection including Nitrile gloves at a minimum when disposing of medications.
   1. Eye protection is recommended when handling liquids including bleach.
2. Take all medications out of their original containers and place all medications including capsules, tablets, liquids and transdermal patches into a disposable container that has a sealable lid.
3. Injectable liquids in measured syringes shall be placed in a sharps container.
4. Remove any personal information, including Rx number, on the empty containers by the most effective means available. Do not use a permanent marker as the marker ink can be easily removed with a solvent.
5. Take the medications to one of the Union County Sheriff’s Department Drug Take Back Day or disposal containers or other FDA approved procedure.

**Resources**

Often the Coroner Investigator will find medications without corresponding containers, medications in mismarked containers or a combination of many medications in one vial. Several resources are available for medication identification. They are: [www.drugs.com, www.rxlist.com a](http://www.drugs.com/)nd [www.epocrates.com w](http://www.epocrates.com/)hich have an application for Smart Phones. Drugs.com and rxlist.com can be accessed on scene via a Smart Phone web browser.

The sites have “pill identifiers” as well as general information for indicated use of thousands of medications.

**RELEASE OF PERSONAL EFFECTS TO NEXT OF KIN:** The Coroner Investigator must be attentive to details of the family network and only release personal property after establishing next of kin. Only then will personal property be released to family members when there is no question as to the relationship that exists. If there is ever a question as to the relationship or it appears that to release items such as large amounts of cash would present problems with others present, no release is to be made until documentation of Administrator or Executor of estate is provided.

**PROTECT THE ESTATE OF THE DECEASED**: The Coroner is responsible for releasing personal effects to the next of kin and making sure that property (house, cars, etc.) are secured until family can be found. Notification of the Office of Prosecuting Attorney is indicated where all attempts to locate next of kin have been exhausted.