

Just Advancements in Death Investigation Practices

Intro [00:00:01] RTI International's Justice Practice area presents Just Science.

Intro [00:00:08] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research, and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In this special release episode, Just Science sat down with Chuck Heurich, senior physical scientist with the National Institute of Justice, and Dr. Jennifer Snippen, experienced medicolegal death investigator and consultant, to discuss recent updates to NIJ's guide for the Death Scene investigator. 25 years ago NIJ released a guide to help medicolegal death investigators navigate complex scenes and cases, a document that has since evolved with the development of best practices and technological advancements. In 2024, a new version was released after a multidisciplinary group of experts collaborated to make four major changes, including updates to documentation for death notifications to the office, procedures for child death investigations, partnering with local law enforcement and more. Listen, as long as Chuck and Dr. Snippen describe what the Death Investigation Guide was developed and how the newest updates came to be, and implications for day to day operations for medicolegal death investigators. This episode is funded by the National Institute of Justice's Forensic Technology Center of Excellence. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may evoke emotional responses, or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host, Kelly Keyes.

Kelly Keyes [00:01:26] Hello, everybody, and welcome to Just Science. I'm Kelly Keyes. I'm a retired medicolegal death investigator in Orange County, California. And I was fortunate to be involved in this death investigation guide for the scene investigator, the National Institute of Justice's or NIJ's recent guide that was released. With us today we have two people who were much more involved in the process than I was. I'd like to start by welcoming Chuck Heurich and Jennifer Snippen. Chuck, do you want to take a moment and introduce yourself?

Chuck Heurich [00:01:55] Hi, I'm Chuck Heurich, I'm a senior physical scientist with the National Institute of Justice. I've been with NIJ since 2005 and have managed many grant programs dealing with the forensic sciences, and most currently I am involved with the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, or NamUs, as well as the update to this death investigation guide.

Kelly Keyes [00:02:18] Thanks for being here. Jen, what about you?

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:02:21] Thanks, Kelly. I'm happy to be here. My name is Jennifer Snippen and I'm a medicolegal death investigator. I'm also a researcher and educator in death investigation. And I have worked primarily in Oregon, which is categorized as a medical examiner system.

Kelly Keyes [00:02:36] So let's just start with what exactly is this guide?

Chuck Heurich [00:02:40] The guide, which originated in 1999, and I know we'll talk about that later. From my perspective, it's a blueprint for medicolegal death investigators to have at their disposal, to look at a death scene in its entirety, and that would be from the initial notification that a death has occurred to all of the steps in between. Until they complete the investigation of the death scene. So it really is a blueprint with steps that can be followed. It's understood that not all of these steps are taken in all jurisdictions, but what the NIJ

wanted to do was put out that blueprint or guideline for the death investigators. So when that they're at a complex scene and sometimes you don't have everything, you know, right there in your memory banks, you can have a guide to go to refresh your memory at the scene. And now online. And we really feel like the groups through the years have done a great job in creating this product.

Kelly Keyes [00:03:38] Thanks. What about for you, Jen? What is the guide to you?

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:03:41] Well, I have an interesting history with this guide, I think because I kind of stumbled into death investigation way back when dinosaurs roamed the Earth in the early 2000s, and I went through a series of different steps trying to get myself educated about this specialty. And it was while I was attending an internship in Charleston, South Carolina, with our common colleague Bobbi Jo O'Neil, that she introduced me to this guide and that paper document that I had in my hands was so important to me moving forward, because coming back to Oregon, we didn't have a very well established medical examiner system at that time. It felt like there wasn't a lot of resources to help me develop our local system, and this gave me a starting point for looking at the equipment that I could invest in, the types of steps I should be taken to ensure that I tried to meet or exceed national standards, you know, kind of best practice, but it's it was something that really helped me a lot in the initial stages of trying to develop our local death investigation system.

Kelly Keyes [00:04:41] That's awesome. Thanks for that. Chuck, what's the history of the guide? You mentioned that it came out initially. I think you said in 1999. How did we get to today with this new addition?

Chuck Heurich [00:04:51] Things back then worked a little differently with federal funding and how we got involved with projects. But I do know that NIJ was very involved with the death investigation community and the forensic science community, and someone from the field probably said, hey, it would be really great if somebody put out a guide to medicolegal death investigation. And at that time, NIJ was the go to in the Department of Justice to fund this type of project. What I found really interesting when I looked into the history of the guide, the original guide that was put out in 1999, had a review panel of 144 members. If you can imagine trying to manage that many people, I'm sure it was a great undertaking. But what was also interesting to me then was in the 1999 version some of the organizations that were involved in this 144 member group were the United States Conference of Mayors, the National Association of Counties, National Association of Medical Examiners, NAME, International Association of Coroners, and Medical Examiners, ICME and the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigation. But it was those other ones that really jumped out at me. So there was a really broad set of input in the first guide. Fast forward to 2010 and somebody said, hey, you know, things have changed a lot in these 11 years. We probably need an update. So again, NIJ convened a working group, a much smaller one of subject matter experts with more focus on the actual practitioners. So NAME, ABMDI, IACME, and other affiliated forensic experts. Now, again, fast forward to 2019. The CDC came to NIJ and said, hey, we would really like to be involved in an update of this. And again, it was a group of about 40 people. From that, we whittled it down to an editorial board review that came up with the final product.

Kelly Keyes [00:06:53] Is this update different than the update in 2010?

Chuck Heurich [00:06:56] It really is, because if you think about the world in general, things have changed incredibly. And as we all know in forensic science, you know, thing

that's changed incredibly. The way we've been able to communicate has changed. Technology has changed dramatically with regards to the ability to photograph and document scenes and advances in different types of deaths. So as time goes on, not only does technology change, but our knowledge base increases. We learn more, we know more, we know how things work and how things change. And that gives us the ability to look at something like death investigation and put a new spin on improvements to performing the tasks associated with death investigation.

Kelly Keyes [00:07:41] I was certified death investigator by AMBDI, American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators, and I believe there's always been a tie in between sort of the work that they do at least pass tests and additions, ABMDI and the guide. Jennifer, do you know anything about that?

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:08:00] I know that when I was studying to become first registry and then board certified by the ABMDI, that this was offered to me as a suggested study tool. And as far as any formal collaboration or formal linking to it, I can't speak to that, but I know that this is one of the leading references that new death investigators are appointed to, to use them in preparation for those certification exams.

Chuck Heurich [00:08:23] It's not supposed to be a guide that the federal government has put out and said, this is the way you must do things. It's really a guideline, and my understanding is that ABMDI does promote it as a study guide for their certification process, because it is so comprehensive and it has a lot of detail in it that they want their certified death investigators not only to be able to perform the task, but to comprehend the reason they're doing it a certain way out in the field.

Kelly Keyes [00:08:54] It's really nice that it was a collaboration between people with experience, especially in medicolegal death investigation. Jen, from your perspective, how did the updating process work?

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:09:04] I received my invitation to work on this project back in early 2021, and from that very first email, I was really impressed. It really struck me that there was a distinct effort to make this kind of a representative sample of the world of medicolegal death investigation. So there were federal, state, county and city level people. There were people from tiny rural jurisdictions, giant urban jurisdictions. Somebody took a lot of effort to make sure that we had a good representation at that meeting. The first meetings that occurred over 2021. So one of the challenges of having such a broad spectrum of individuals collaborating is a lot of busy schedules, a lot of different time zones, and a lot of different ways in which this task is undertaken and a lot of different language for the same, speaking about the same things, but describing them in different ways. So we spent a lot of time working on what was going to be the breadth and the depth of any changes that we make, and whether we should strive for the ideal that we all hope is out there, as opposed to being realistic about the challenges that everybody face. And I think having that big group of people, a lot of them with a lot of experience and expertise, representing NAME, ABMDI, IACME, the NSA originally, the Haida folks, we had IACP, International Association of Chiefs of Police. So we had great representation. And that led us to a really sweet spot, I think, of trying to approach all of the changes in a way that is most useful to the greatest amount of people. In fall of 2023, a group of us were invited back to participate on an editorial board to clean up the final document, make any final decisions, work on formatting and streamlining decisions.

Kelly Keyes [00:10:47] I certainly really like that this new edition maintains the same format. It's got the principle of each section, a policy suggestion, procedure, and then a nice summary that wraps up everything in the section. So I love that the format has stayed the same. From your perspective, what are some of the biggest new changes to the latest edition?

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:11:07] Some of the things that stand out to me are that a short glossary was included. We've added links to other documents that may be useful. You will find that there is a new section that didn't exist in the previous guides that highlights the importance of the process of receiving that first notification of the death, and the importance of documenting that you were notified of a death. And briefly addresses the important decisions that have to be made when you are notified of a death. I do remember in the first scene guide, the very first section is arriving at the scene, and it always felt to me like there was a something missing before that, like what is happening before you arrive at the scene. And I working on some previous projects, I was always looking for references that talk about how did death investigators get notified? How did they make the decision to go? And so I love that this document addresses that. Some updates on the equipment list. You know, like you mentioned, there's no Polaroids anymore. We don't list that as important knowing that everybody lives on their the cell phones relying on those for their watches. One other thing is there's a distinct point made in this document that medicolegal death investigators must collaborate closely with law enforcement partners, but that our investigations are a distinct process. And highlighting that early in this guide is that something new that we didn't do before. And I think it's a really important point.

Kelly Keyes [00:12:28] Yeah, I think that initial notification and determination of response section is a good addition. Obviously, it is a guide for the scene investigators specifically. You know, not talking about all the other factors of death investigation that necessarily go on outside the scene, although it certainly does, I think dip its toes into many of those other things, but it does feel a little more complete to me with that section. So that was a nice, nice addition for sure.

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:12:58] I agree, it's a nice little addition into why you're at the scene and some decisions that have to be made before you go to the scene. And I think it really rounds out the document.

Kelly Keyes [00:13:08] Yeah, I also like that it makes reference to following local laws and statutes related to things like evidence collection and recognizing that variability.

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:13:17] There is a definite focus on recognizing how variable death investigation practices around the country, and respecting the fact that different agencies in different locations have different limitations on what they are able to do.

Kelly Keyes [00:13:31] Chuck, do you want to comment any more on that? I would imagine from a national perspective that is relatively important to you.

Chuck Heurich [00:13:38] It is, and that's why we take a great amount of time and care to assemble the working groups that we put together like this. We want a broad cross-section of not only death investigation practitioners involved with this, but we also want people involved that are part of or are touched by death investigation. And Jen mentioned, most importantly, law enforcement, because sometimes the death investigation crosses the medicolegal death investigation and crime scene from a law enforcement perspective. So

we wanted to make sure that we covered that as well as being able to take from start to finish. And Jen mentioned the inclusion of the new section, notification and determination of response that came up as part of this group to be a very important part that was lacking in the previous guides. So we take all of that information from our subject matter experts and let them kind of work together to figure out how that best fits in to the format of the update, while keeping the original structure and feel of the guide consistent and cohesive.

Kelly Keyes [00:14:46] I'm going to switch gears a little bit here and talk about appendix A, which is investigative tools and equipment. How is that new list of equipment decided upon, Chuck?

Chuck Heurich [00:14:57] Well, again, Kelly, it's really up to the subject matter experts on the group. And as Jen mentioned, we broke them initially up into subcommittees, so we've had each of them. I take a particular section of the 2011 guide. We thought that would be the most efficient way to tackle the update, and we had each subcommittee was built in a similar way with the same types of subject matter experts in them. So they had a cross-section of all the people involved in depth investigation. But like I said earlier, you know, technology evolves so fast and how people process scenes is always changing. So we looked at the technology and equipment and supplies that are available now to medicolegal death investigators. And we wanted to make sure we had a comprehensive list of those types of equipment. Not necessarily to say that jurisdictions absolutely had to have these things, because we all know that there are rural jurisdictions, very small jurisdictions, that aren't able to afford a lot of these things, but they can see that they're on the list, and they can use that within their agency to say, look at what they're recognizing as something that would be valuable to our jobs. And that may help a jurisdiction or an agency be able to fight for getting funding for those types of equipment that they might not necessarily be able to get or talk to a jurisdiction nearby that has that equipment and may be able to share it with them and use it on death investigations that they're part of. So we just want to make sure that it's as up to date as possible when we know what's going to be published, because we also understand that when it's published, much like a car, when you drive it off the lot, it's not going to be the same. It will be different, and technology has already evolved. So there are probably things today that, while we're talking that aren't on the list, that have been thought of since we put this publication out.

Kelly Keyes [00:16:54] Yeah, I think it is a great opportunity for maybe a new coroner who's establishing an office or, you know, somebody who's new into this role to go ahead and have a place to start of things to buy. I know, Jen, you mentioned that when you started in Oregon that you would use the supply list back then. I'm also the chair of the OSAC Organization of Scientific Area committees, Medicolegal Death Investigation Subcommittee, and we've identified this as a topic that's so important that we were working on developing a document from OSAC. So I think that that is a very useful tool for the community as well, especially the smaller offices that are under resourced.

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:17:35] Yeah. Kelly. And one thing I want to point out to this is the appendix A, it states that the, you know, medicolegal death investigators may be collaborating with other agencies and may share some equipment, but ultimately we're responsible for our part of it. And I have to say that early on, as I was getting established, I had to purchase my own equipment, and I had to be very mindful about what was luxury and what was necessary that I'm spending my money on. Right. Well, some of the stuff that I invested in, I would take to death investigation scenes, and many times we would use the law enforcement materials and I would just keep mine in my car. But there were a number of times where, for whatever reason, they didn't have the equipment and the fact

that I was adequately prepared. You know, using this guide gave me a stock of materials that then they could use. And so it not only aids and like you said, a new coroner who's freshly elected or a medicolegal death investigator who's trying to get a local office up and running, but we can ultimately help our law enforcement colleagues to, if we're better prepared and not relying on them for everything. And as Chuck mentioned, using this as a justification for why we do need the appropriate tools and equipment to do a professional job.

Kelly Keyes [00:18:39] And that sounds like that's really a great opportunity to show our law enforcement colleagues or other colleagues that we're working with on scenes our professionalism. And the professionalism that a medicolegal death investigator can bring to a scene, that's a great story. So, Chuck, what else what else is new in this guide?

Chuck Heurich [00:18:57] The advances in technology is the easy low hanging fruit to talk about. Everybody knows DNA technology has improved in the way we can get more from smaller samples. There's the availability now a forensic genetic genealogy to make a more concrete identification of someone. If the death investigators is dealing with remains of someone that is unknown, and some of the other sciences obviously related to death investigation have improved. One of the things that's new about this guide, and I think it's really important to mention, because at the onset of the podcast, I talked about the CDC being a partner, and they really brought a unique perspective to this discussion because their focus is on public health, not really public safety, but there's such an intersection in those two areas that we wanted to try to incorporate that feel into this new update. And we did so with our input on areas that are really important in that world of public health, and that's things like drug deaths. I mean, with the opioid epidemic, we wanted to make sure there were things involved in here that, you know, related to the differences in those types of scenes. And as well, there wasn't always as much covered with regards to child and infant deaths, which are both so vitally important to public health and public safety concerns in the United States. So we tried to incorporate those. And just through the discussion of creating this update, the CDC was really helpful in those types of discussions and finding where we could insert things in this guide to make them valuable and to stand out to the investigators as an update. Not to mention what we discussed about the independent collaboration and the investigations themselves. You know, at a scene you may have someone that's from the public health sector in the government, you would may have law enforcement and you may have a medicolegal death investigator all at the same scene. And it's so important that they understand each other's role and that they understand the steps that each has to take in their particular investigation. It's the sense of you need to be open and collaborative with these other agencies, while still meeting the goals of your investigation.

Kelly Keyes [00:21:15] Chuck, that public health piece is really to me when I looked at the guide, and I do have it in front of me. Section E recording the decedent profile information. I really think that a lot of that is covered in there. You know, talking about not just how the decedent was discovered in the circumstances of death, but it goes so far as to suggest that the investigator gets information on medical history, mental health history, possibly helping to determine manner of death. But then also the social history part is, is really extensive in this. And I recall some discussion about that. You know, it includes information suggesting as relevant to the investigation, financial history, daily routines, habits, activities, you know, a new one probably that in the initial version of the guide didn't exist is pertinent written or electronic correspondence like social media sites, text messages, emails, those sort of things. So obviously that's a great example of the update, but also kind of that public health responsibility that a medical examiner or coroner's office

or justice of the peace in Texas has the opportunity. And I think that's great that that's recognized and provides that guidance as well. And that's be it on the scene or as part of the ongoing investigation.

Chuck Heurich [00:22:30] Yeah, I completely agree, Kelly, because I think all of that information, because the CDC in the public health world is so data driven, if we can collect all that information and have that at our disposal from death investigations. The collection of that data over time can help to inform not only the public health community, but also the community at large with law enforcement, medicolegal death investigators, and also the general public on trends and things and why certain things happen and how certain things happen in death investigations and actually, honestly, in the lives of people who come to the point of the end of their life. And why did that occur? Is there something we could have done to prevent it? Is there something along the way that, you know, triggered them to choose to commit suicide? Or were they killed by another person because of some interaction in their world? So I think the more information we can collect at scenes and with regard to scenes, the better off everybody at the end of the day will be moving forward.

Kelly Keyes [00:23:37] Yeah, I think a great example I always use for the public health impacts of medical examiner coroner data is related to sudden infant deaths. You know, with the Back to Sleep campaign really being based on information found from death scenes that babies who are not sleeping on their back were dying at higher rates. And, you know, as such, the rates of infant deaths have declined in this country, which is obviously fantastic. Jennifer.

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:24:03] Yeah. Kelly, I'd like to add on that. I think most of the lay public and many new people new to medicolegal death investigation, think that this is primarily a criminal justice role, and you don't have to spend much time in this field before you realize that the bulk, the vast majority of what we do is not related to criminal justice. Those cases are absolutely critical, a critical part of what we do. But much of it is public health, community caretaking, gathering data that advances future medical research. So the fact that we take an effort in this guide to highlight that, I think we kind of shift the focus, isn't it doesn't give the indication that everything is a crime and really points to some of the nuances and some of the complexity of the small details that are required to parse out different types of death investigations that are not homicides. You mentioned infant death. It's we have probably ten times the references to infant death in the new guide as the previous. You know, we talk about prescription medications and what you should be recording. And something is as important as making sure that what's in the bottle matches what's on the label. These are all things that are people who are new to the field, might never think of. And I think that is that's a really great point, that the focus on public health really stands out in this guide.

Kelly Keyes [00:25:17] There's a theme of personal safety throughout, with that topic addressed early on in the guide and throughout. And I don't recall that quite being as much of a focus in past guides.

Chuck Heurich [00:25:29] Yeah, I think it's really important because I actually started my career as a crime scene investigator in Baltimore City from 1988 to 1992. And back in those days, we were considered kind of a bag and tag operation where we just went and took pictures of things and put it in bags, and the science was different. And policies and procedures and standards were different. And I really think that back then there was very little thought about the investigators, whether it be a law enforcement crime scene investigator or a medicolegal death investigator. It was just like, here's what you do. You

go out, you do your job. You know, whether it's a hazardous scene, you know, may have been a little bit of a thought. If there was something like somebody died in the gas truck that spilled and there's gasoline everywhere, all the way up to the 80s where I worked. And there was knowledge about the Aids epidemic. And you went to a crime scene and there was a lot of blood. You knew how to protect yourself there. But I think it goes beyond that because there is so much information we know now about the mental health of the investigators, the mental health of first responders and how we really need to address those types of things as well. So I think it's important for not only to do the job effectively, but to protect them at the crime scene and give them the support that they need, maybe mentally after they perform this job, because that's a really tough job.

Kelly Keyes [00:26:56] Well stated, well stated. I think that might be what I'm most excited about.

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:27:01] Adding on to what Chuck said, I think as a profession, the medicolegal death investigation profession tends to be fairly overlooked and kind of operate in the shadows. Everyone from OSHA to county administrators to state and federal policymakers don't tend to have us way high on their radar. And maybe in some of the more well resourced and well developed larger jurisdictions, that might not be the case. But I know, speaking to friends and colleagues across the country, many of us have nobody really looking over our shoulder to ensure that we are safe or to follow up with us after cases. And I know that's definitely was the case for me early on. And I made some stupid decisions and things in this guide that can serve as reminders for us about our own actions are useful and things that those ultimately responsible for us and our safety. It all might help to just turn the dial just a little bit and help the professionals doing this difficult work receive just a little bit more support and a little bit more education about how they can invest in their own safety and look for assistance like Chuck mentioned after the after the fact with some of these more difficult cases.

Chuck Heurich [00:28:12] And I totally agree with that. And one of the things that came to my mind is, I think part of the problem with the recognition of death investigators is the misconception of the general public that all death investigations are handled by law enforcement CSI. If there's a vehicle accident, the CSI's don't go to that because it's not a crime scene investigation. All of the deaths that are not violent crime related deaths are handled by you and your colleagues. And I think a lot of the public doesn't know that. So they don't really understand that there are really two different worlds with regard to the death investigation. And I think maybe that's something we take moving forward as a group, putting this guide together as to decide how we could move forward with informing the general public that medicolegal death investigators are a separate set of professionals and do a larger amount of work than a lot of the crime scene investigators do.

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:29:06] I agree, I was thinking just the other day how if you look at any TV show, you look at the books on the bookshelf, they all talk about the forensic pathologist doing the work, and they talk about law enforcement and detectives doing the work. And then occasionally we have an Angela Tron or a fancy high tech van with people in stilettos and flashlights during the their nighttime examinations of scenes. But there's very little mention of this sub specialty of medicolegal death investigation, with few exceptions. You know, that's something that excites me about this is early on. It shows this as a distinct profession, and I think it's a good step towards promoting that and a good step towards professionalizing it as well.

Chuck Heurich [00:29:43] Absolutely. And back in the day I'll date myself. But back in the day when I was watching TV, Quincy and Sam were doing death investigations and it wasn't. They didn't have death investigators. It was the pathologist and his assistant going out the scenes. And that's just not the way it is.

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:29:59] Yeah, but the shortage of forensic pathologists, even if that would be ideal, it's not going to happen. And it is a specialty. There's special skills. You have to be a death investigator that are different than autopsy skills, that are different than toxicology skills, they're different than law enforcement specialization. It's a distinct group of special techniques and education and talents that you have to be a successful medicolegal death investigator.

Kelly Keyes [00:30:22] So it sounds like the guy has a lot of potential use other than just for death investigators themselves, be it a new a death investigator or even a long term death investigator, you know, certainly no two scenes are ever the same. And I was one of the things I loved about my 25 year career as a death investigator was I was always learning something. So the guy, you know, certainly plays a role for a death investigator no matter where in their career, but also seems like it would be a great resource for someone who's interested in a career as a medicolegal death investigator or a forensic pathologist. You know, I always have people reaching out to me to ask, I want to be a death investigator, and I want to be a crime scene investigator. And this seems like it would be a great resource for those folks. Jen, you mentioned you are involved in education. Is there a role for this, you know, in the in the classroom at all that you're aware of?

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:31:13] Well, absolutely. I will say that I just teach at a local college and we're working on developing some medicolegal or forensic related programs there, and I've encouraged them to order copies of this book to use for students in those future classes and discussing the classes that we're trying to design. I also think it is obviously for new coroners and new medical death investigators. It's a no brainer that this should be in their hands from the beginning. For anybody who is planning to become accredited by either ICME or NAME, this is an awesome reference. You have to have policies. That's part of the accreditation checklist. And so this is a great place to start with developing policies to reach that level of professionalism in an office, and then using this to educate the people who are funding us and making important decisions about our offices and our functioning. And of course, you know, the general public. I don't know what's necessarily written for the general public, and I don't know that they're the ideal audience for it. But the more people that learn about what we do, the better off that they will be in the long run. But I think planning for accreditation, writing policies, training new people, and then also we can't overlook what we've talked about law enforcement a number of times. There are places in the country that are so underdeveloped or under-resourced that their law enforcement is being forced to act as medicolegal death investigators. So they're taking on an additional role led by different statutes, different responsibilities. And that's not ideal. But they're doing the best they can where they are. And this is an awesome resource for those folks, even though they aren't, in most cases, going to be professional medicolegal death investigators. They are for a short period of time trying to fill that role. And so this might be a really useful tool.

Chuck Heurich [00:32:51] I think that's a great point, Jen, but especially when it came to my mind when you were discussing that we employ a Navajo Nation representative in the NamUs program, and she had a over 20 year career as a criminal investigator/death investigator for Navajo Nation. And there are two very different responsibilities and roles. But she did both for the Navajo Nation. So I think your point is well put.

Kelly Keyes [00:33:15] And I imagine there's probably also a role for the criminal justice system, for prosecutors, defense, judges, those sort of things as well. So to that point, Chuck, where can people access this guide? How can people, you know, get this information?

Chuck Heurich [00:33:29] Well, Kelly, the simple answer is they can go to the NIJ website and search for Death Investigation: A Guide To The Scene Investigator and it will take them to the publication. And when they go to that link, there should be instructions there on how they can actually order print copy for their agency or several print copies for their agency.

Kelly Keyes [00:33:52] And I know you guys have had booths at some of the conferences NAME, IACME. I know I was able to get a print copy there. Is that something that might happen again in the future at associated conferences?

Chuck Heurich [00:34:06] We printed a first printing of 2500 copies. It's my understanding there are still plenty of available right now, so we plan to have them probably in a few weeks at the American Academy of Forensic Sciences and then down the road at IACME as well as NAME in the fall.

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:34:23] And I just want to say, I really appreciate the fact that paper copies are available. You know, I know there was a version in between, and I don't know that there was a paper copy available, and now that version is not on my desk. You know, there's something even in this digital age where we have access to 27 million PDFs and online forums and all of that. There's something with this guide being a paper copy that we can throw in our car, throw in our bags, having our a desktop. I think that's a really valuable service that's been provided. So thank you for that.

Chuck Heurich [00:34:50] And just in talking to people at meetings I have internally with Department of Justice and other federal agencies, we always make mention of the resource. You know, we would like to update this every five years, if possible, to be more regular with the updates, rather than kind of knee jerking a reaction and looking back and saying, oh my gosh, a decade has passed and we haven't done anything with this. So we're looking forward to doing a revision of this guide more regularly.

Kelly Keyes [00:35:16] So other than a potential new addition in five-ish years, anything else with this? What's next?

Chuck Heurich [00:35:23] What we'd like to see going forward is when we have the electronic version of this to have sort of a web based toolkit that goes along with it. That would include the guide. And when the links are highlighted, you can link out to different documents about death investigation or about equipment. A much more interactive type of resource that investigators can use. While understanding is, as Jen mentioned, you know, when you go out to the scene, having a copy of this in your glove box is awesome because in rural jurisdictions or places you go where there's not internet access, an app may not be available, or you may not be able to get the guide digitally unless you have download it to your to your personal device. So we're thinking more big picture for the next version of this. And even for this version, if we can get the resources together in conjunction with CDC and work with someone such as, you know, NIJ's Forensic Technology Center of Excellence to maybe develop a toolkit that can accompany this

guide for the investigators, as well as for people that just want to learn about death and investigation, like Jen mentioned.

Kelly Keyes [00:36:31] Well, as we wrap up, I want to give each of you just an opportunity for any last parting thoughts.

Dr. Jennifer Snippen [00:36:36] Thanks, Kelly. It's been fun to visit with you and Chuck today, and I just keep being reminded that the quality of any death investigation and the quality of any decisions that are made during the course of a death investigation are going to be completely dependent on the quality of information that we use, the quality information that we obtain to make those decisions. And so this document is just another step towards improving the attention to detail and the types of information we might need to gather at a scene to help us make informed decisions, to give our very best data to public health and our very best informed decisions to the criminal justice system. So I'm pretty excited about how this may be helping in tiny little ways across the country. That will all add up to an improvement in death investigation. And I want to thank the NIJ and the CDC for prioritizing this, and for continuing to acknowledge the importance of death investigation and provide federal support for this important work. So thanks for having me here and be exciting to see what all what all we can do with this guide moving forward.

Kelly Keyes [00:37:39] Very well stated, Chuck. Any parting thoughts for listeners?

Chuck Heurich [00:37:43] Sure. And echoing Jen, NIJ and myself being involved with the project, we were and are very excited about this update and also excited about the future updates and what we might be able to add to this resource for death investigators. But I want to emphasize that it's just that it's a resource and we're happy to provide it. And we hope it's helpful for death scene investigation. We hope it's helpful to talk to and educate legislators and policymakers about the vast amount of resources that are needed in this community, and that death investigation needs and deserves to do proper death investigation for the public. Most importantly, I think we need to for the people listening to this podcast. We need to understand that the most important resource in death investigation are the people doing it. And we need to make sure that we take care of them. And that's what we tried to incorporate into this guide as well. We have a responsibility to make sure that the people doing this job have what they need, and this guide is just a small piece of that.

Kelly Keyes [00:38:50] Well, thank you again, Jen and Chuck, for being here and talking about this guide. We will put a link to obtaining the guide in the notes for Just Science, but I will remind the listeners that it is National Institute of Justice's Death Investigation. A Guide For The Scene Investigator. Thank you everyone for listening.

Outro [00:39:10] Next season, Just Science will release episodes covering various topics for Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Opinions are points of views expressed in this podcast, represent a consensus of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.