



THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301-1200

JUN 4, 2001

HEALTH AFFAIRS

MEMORANDUM FOR ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE ARMY (M&RA)
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE NAVY (M&RA)
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE (SAF/MI)
DIRECTOR, ARMED FORCES INSTITUTE OF PATHOLOGY

SUBJECT: Psychological Autopsies

References: (a) Title 10, United States Code
(b) DoDD 5136.1

The term "psychological autopsy" has been used to describe both a psychosocial investigation after a confirmed suicide, and an investigation as to the manner of death when suicide has not been ruled out. This policy is being written to clarify the purpose and procedures of psychological autopsies. This is an interim policy, as a more detailed description of psychological autopsies will be incorporated into a forthcoming Department of Defense Instruction on the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology.

The primary purpose of a psychological autopsy is to assist in ascertaining the manner of death. Normally, the Military Services shall perform a psychological autopsy only in cases where the manner of death has not been determined. In other unusual circumstances, when approved by the Armed Forces Medical Examiner, a psychological autopsy may be performed to amplify information or help explain circumstances relating to a suicide.

The psychological autopsy is a forensic investigative tool, separate and distinct from suicide event surveillance for epidemiological purposes and from the provision of clinical crisis services to the unit and family in the aftermath of a death. At a minimum, epidemiological data shall be gathered on all suicides with standardized database tools. Services may employ other procedures to gather additional information.

A mental health professional who has an active unrestricted license and who has received specific forensic training to conduct the assessment is authorized to conduct psychological autopsies and submit reports of findings. No other personnel are so authorized. The psychological autopsy shall include relevant information from numerous areas including any past psychiatric history, family history, legal difficulties, warning signs, and degree of suicidal intent shown by the victim.

Prior to initiating the psychological autopsy, the identified mental health professional conducting the psychological autopsy shall coordinate with the agency investigating the death to avoid duplicative work and conflicts. The psychological autopsy report shall be provided to the

medical examiner, with a copy to the military criminal investigative organization. Psychological autopsy materials shall not be used or disclosed for any other purpose, unless use or disclosure is required by pertinent statutory or regulatory authority.

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs shall establish forensic training curriculum guidance and a quality assurance mechanism for review and performance of psychological autopsies.

This memorandum is effective immediately. My point of contact for this issue is Lieutenant Colonel E. Cameron Ritchie at 703-681-1703.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Jarrett Clinton". The signature is cursive and somewhat stylized.

J. Jarrett Clinton, MD, MP
Acting Assistant Secretary