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Coroner Bill Ryan completed a false death certificate!

Coroner and local funeral home misstate / mishandle cause of death, autopsy and funeral on recent death.

by Dave Featherly

In Wyoming, about the only qualification to being a county coroner is vote-getting ability. The coroner does not have to be a medical doctor, a pathologist, or even a funeral home director, but he probably should be able to deal with death.

A couple years back, voters in Laramie County decided to make the county coroner's position a full-time one, at an annual salary of \$48,000.

Bill Ryan has run unopposed and the Republican write-in candidate, who has usually gotten enough votes to place their name on the general election ballot, has opted not to enter the contest.

A person elected coroner must become certified under various education requirements but there is no such requirement in advance of becoming a candidate for the office.

W.S. Statute § 7-4-104 describes what a "coroner's case" is. It is a case "involving a death which may involve any of the following conditions:" Those conditions include violent or criminal action, apparent suicide, accident, etc.

The final condition that makes it a coroner's case, identified as item (H) under 7-4-104, is: "If the cause is unknown."

A definition is provided for the coroner. "County coroner" means the elected or appointed officer of the county whose task is to investigate the cause of death in a coroner's case.

We established immediately above that a death by unknown cause is a coroner's case and then that the county coroner has the task to investigate the cause of death in the case of such a death - by unknown cause.

Cause of Death (Dorothy Mae Clark)

Laramie County Coroner, William C. Ryan
Sudden Cardiac Death
History of recent Myocarditis & Pneumonia
Certificate of Death, May 3, 2005

Patrick C. Allen, M.D., Forensic Pathologist
Pulmonary thromboemboli. Multiple, large,
with some showing "organization"
Autopsy Report, May 6, 2005

According to the Certification of Death completed by Bill Ryan, which we now know is erroneous, "guesses" at the date of death being April 30, 2005.

Because of Ryan's horrendous error on the cause of death, it is easy to question if he got any part of the Certificate of Death right.

There is evidence which leads surviving family members to believe the death may have occurred a day earlier - April 29, 2005.

The son and daughter of Mrs. Clark have provided the following details about their mother's death to the Cheyenne Herald:

Sometime after midday on Friday, April 30, two neighbors checked on the welfare of Mrs. Clark after being called by a beautician and told a morning appointment had been missed.

Dorothy Clark was born in Cheyenne on January 26, 1921 and was a vibrant 84-year old woman, having only recently returned from a two-week European river cruise with her daughter. The daughter said she had very vigorous during the vacation and her health appeared fine. Mrs. Clark's own mother passed away in 2002, just five weeks short of her 104th birthday. Longevity runs in the family.

She had also recently underwent cataract surgery (with 100% success) and had a pre-op physical which judged her fit for that eye surgery.

Her daughter told the Herald that her mother was 84, "but looked 70."

One of the neighbors who had found the body called the daughter, who lives in Parker, Colorado, while emergency personnel were in the house. She (the daughter) spoke with the coroner while he was in the house and asked Bill Ryan if there would be an autopsy. He told her he wasn't sure and that he was still gathering "facts." The daughter informed him that she wanted an autopsy. Ryan told her he "didn't think it would be necessary" but he wanted to speak with the deceased's primary care physician. He was provided that information.

While in the home, Ryan asked the neighbors who had found the body several questions about the health of Mrs. Clark. They told him about an earlier bout with loss of balance, which had gone away. They told Ryan that she had had hypertension but that it was under control with medication. They told him about the successful cataract surgery and that Mrs. Clark had complained of "acid reflux" on occasion.

The son, who lives in California, asked the neighbors later if they had told Ryan anything about his mother having had pneumonia or heart problems and they said, "absolutely not!" When asked further whether they had said anything that Ryan could have interpreted as his mother having pneumonia or heart problems, they again said, "absolutely not."

The causes of death listed on the Certificate of Death, which was signed by Laramie County Coroner William C. (Bill) Ryan, he said, were "Sudden Cardiac Death" and "History of Recent Myocarditis and Pneumonia."

Neither of those causes are true or accurate.

The daughter told Ryan that she would be in Cheyenne in a few hours, at which time Ryan told her they would need permission to perform preliminary embalming. When she inquired as to whether that action would render a later autopsy meaningless, he told her that they would do only arterial embalming and that would have no effect on a subsequent autopsy. The daughter gave him verbal permission to conduct the first-stage embalming.

He asked the daughter if she (the family) had a preference as to which funeral home to deliver the body to and was told Schrader Funeral Home. (Bill Ryan was, of course, for years been connected to the Wiederspahn (Radomsky) Funeral Home.)

The son in California, a retired LAPD officer and current FBI agent, was notified of his mother's death and himself called her home and spoke with Bill Ryan. Offering that his mother was a "vibrant 84-year old who, to my knowledge, had no chronic or life threatening ailments," he also asked Ryan if an autopsy would be performed.

Ryan was noncommittal.

Things did not improve for the grieving daughter and son who had lost their mother suddenly and unexpectedly.

Their pursuit of an autopsy to determine cause of death was wise. As Cheyenne Herald readers can read in the above box, a forensic pathologist performed an autopsy (even though Schrader Funeral Home damaged the opportunity for an accurate autopsy - see page 4) and determined the cause of death was **NOT** what Ryan had written, but pulmonary thromboemboli, as the autopsy revealed.