

# Autopsies At Center Of Dispute

## Medical Examiner Lacks State License

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A newly hired state medical examiner has performed several autopsies on homicide victims without having a Connecticut medical license, as required by law.

Connecticut defense attorneys said that they wouldn't expect the situation to lead to any acquittals for defendants accused of homicide, but that it could help them obtain plea bargains.

"It will help in a weak case, but it won't defeat a strong one," said Norman A. Pattis, a New Haven defense attorney.

"It might give a defense attorney an additional avenue to attack" the prosecution's case, said Salvatore Bonanno, a Hartford defense attorney.

Officials at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner strongly disputed those assertions and said that Dr. Susan Williams, who was hired in July, has a medical license in Pennsylvania and should receive her Connecticut license next month and that she has all the qualifications necessary to perform expert autopsies.

"She's eminently qualified," said Dr. Edward T. McDonough, deputy chief medical examiner. "It's a paperwork issue."

McDonough also noted that medical examiners with Connecticut licenses have signed the death certificates resulting from autopsies performed by Williams.

Williams could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

Chief State's Attorney Christopher L. Morano agreed that the matter would not present a significant problem in the prosecution of homicide cases.

"The crucial issue is: Does this doctor have the expertise to back up her testimony?" Morano said.

He added, "Defense attorneys are paid to make mountains out of molehills."

The chief medical examiner's office has been operating short-handed since April, when associate examiner Arkady Katsnelson retired after admitting he accepted \$300 from the family of Neil Esposito, whose former girlfriend was charged with causing the automobile accident that killed him.

But McDonough said a backlog of work was not the reason Williams went to work, and was assigned to homicide cases, before she had a state license.

"She was qualified to do them," he said.

Williams applied to the state Department of Public Health for her license, which can take several weeks, McDonough said. But her license would have to be renewed on her birthday in September, so the medical examiner's office told her to wait a few weeks to avoid paying the \$450 annual renewal fee twice, McDonough said.

“Look, this is a small bump in the road,” Pattis said. “But it is garden-variety careless, sheds poor light on that office and is totally unnecessary. All we are asking them is to honor the law when they come to the courtroom.”