

POST MORTEM

1 X 53 HD



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Popular television shows portray death investigators as high-tech sleuths wielding the most sophisticated tools of 21st century science. FRONTLINE's unprecedented investigation found a very different reality: a dysfunctional system in which there are few standards, little oversight, and the mistakes are literally buried. In state after state, reporters found autopsies—our final physical exam—conducted by doctors who lacked certification and training. An increasing number of the 2.5 million Americans who die each year go to the grave without being examined at all. *Post Mortem* shows that errors by coroners and forensic pathologists have allowed potentially guilty perpetrators to go free and the innocent to be accused of crimes they did not commit.

In northern California, FRONTLINE correspondent Lowell Bergman encounters Dr. Thomas Gill, a forensic pathologist who has left a trail of scandals in his wake. "He had been arrested and charged with drunk driving on his way to work early in the morning. He was giving crazy answers about how he thought people died," private investigator Chris Reynolds tells Bergman about Dr. Gill's past. In one murder case, the prosecution was so worried about Gill's testimony that it secretly coached him and videotaped the sessions. When the tapes were exposed, the prosecutor was suspended from practicing law for four years. But because of the lack of oversight for death investigators, Dr. Gill has been able to find a series of posts in the field.

In New Orleans, FRONTLINE reporters meet Coroner Frank Minyard, who has been elected to the post 10 times and has the power to classify whether or not a death is a homicide, though he is a gynecologist by training. The investigation finds evidence that Coroner Minyard and his staff mishandled autopsies of people who died in the custody of law enforcement officers. Their conclusions had the effect of clearing officers of wrongdoing, but in case after case, independent forensic pathologists have challenged their findings. Mike Miceli, the father of one alleged victim, tells correspondent Bergman: "They find what the sheriff or the police department want them to find."

In Los Angeles, *Post Mortem* reveals that it is the vulnerable—the sick, the young, the elderly—who suffer most from our dysfunctional system of death investigation. The reporting reveals how a caregiver at a high-end nursing home beat 80-year-old resident Elmore Kittower, breaking 29 of his ribs and smashing his toes and larynx. But when Kittower died, his death certificate stated that he'd died of "natural causes." Only because of an anonymous tip days after his death was Kittower's body exhumed and the caregiver sentenced to life in prison.

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CREDITS

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