



# COLLEGE of AMERICAN PATHOLOGISTS

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January 27, 2025

(VIA E-Mail: [debra.lekanoff@leg.wa.gov](mailto:debra.lekanoff@leg.wa.gov))

Honorable Debra Lekanoff  
Vice Chair, Health Care and Wellness Committee  
Washington State Legislature  
422 John L. O'Brien  
PO Box 40600  
Olympia, WA 98504

**Re: Opposition to House Bill 1478 (Superseding of Medical Examiner Authority)**

Dear Vice Chair Lekanoff:

It is with great concern that I am writing in opposition to House Bill 1478. I am writing on behalf of the College of American Pathologists (CAP) and the Washington State Society of Pathologists (WSSP). This bill is fundamentally counter to the practice of medicine and the ability of physicians, including medical examiners to exercise medical judgment in an autopsy finding.

Under this legislation, a family member of an individual whose cause of death is determined by the medical examiner to be attributable to opioids, may compel the physician medical examiner to alter his medical finding and medical determination. In order to ensure the quality practice of medicine and the integrity of the Washington State medical examiner system, the independent medical judgment of a physician in determining manner and cause of death cannot and should not be subject to override from family members.

The American Medical Association (AMA) in its policy (H-85.498) states:

- Our American Medical Association supports the independent authority of physicians to provide accurate and transparent postmortem assessments and death investigation reporting in a manner free from undue influence.
- Our AMA will advocate with state and federal governments to ensure laws and regulations do not compromise a physician's ability to use their medical judgement in the reporting of postmortem assessments and medicolegal death investigations.

Similarly, the College of American Pathologists (CAP) in our policy states:

“Protecting physicians providing forensic medical services (e.g., pathologists and non-pathologist physicians acting as medical examiners or coroners; i.e., “forensic physicians”) from undue influence is necessary to ensure the independence of medicolegal death investigations, to safeguard medical integrity, and to preserve public trust and confidence.”

The proposed legislation (HB 1478) by conferring upon a family member statutory authority to “correct” a physician Medical Examiner’s findings is an unprecedented and egregious superseding of medical judgment that does not, in any way, serve the public interest. In fact, it is our position that any such public policy undermines the medical examiner system and public confidence in such system to the detriment of the administration of justice.

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While the opioid and addiction crisis are significant public health threats that needlessly claim many lives and at great family distress and societal cost, this legislation does not ameliorate the problem. This public health challenge cannot be solved by undermining and negating physician medical judgment in the performance of autopsies which must remain purely scientific, evidence based and factual in nature and substance. To do otherwise, will undermine public confidence in the practice of medicine and its necessary and appropriate use in the administration of criminal justice and civil proceedings.

For these reasons, no such law exists in the United States in any state. Accordingly, we urge that this bill not be advanced and be withdrawn from legislative consideration. Thank you for your courtesies and consideration.

Sincerely,

Donald S. Karcher, MD, FCAP  
President

cc: Representative Julia Reed  
Sean Graham, Washington State Medical Association