

A hard job: Delivering message of death

Medical examiners find experience is the best teacher as they break the news to the survivors

By ALISA RIVERA
of The Oregonian staff

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It's an emotionally challenging job. He is still pained by the memory of telling a father his 15-year-old daughter was killed in an auto accident.

"She was burned just enough so viewing wasn't possible," Gray said.

But despite the obvious negatives of his job, Gray finds it rewarding. He and his fellow deputies know how important it is to deliver the news with sensitivity and compassion.

"We're trying to make sure the families get on the road to surviving," Gray said. "We want to make sure it's done right."

The Multnomah County Medical Examiner's Office employs five deputies. All are supervised by Bob Felton, chief deputy medical examiner. In addition to making death notifications, deputies are responsible for performing death-scene investigations and helping to identify bodies.

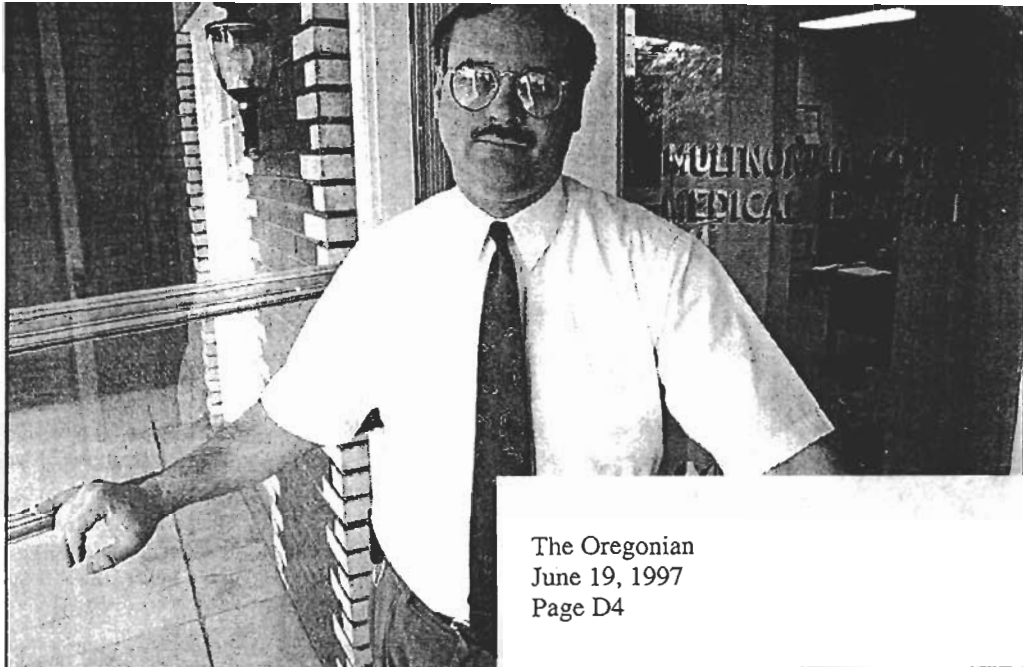
The deputy medical examiners make most of the death notifications in Multnomah County, averaging three to four notifications per day, said Deputy Duane Bigoni. Doctors and emergency room staff make most of the remaining notifications in the county.

The first step in making a notification is finding the next of kin. It is a task that can require the skills of a detective.

"Sometimes you find the family in 10 or 15 minutes," Gray said. "Sometimes you never find them."

If a person dies at home, the deputies will try going through a wallet or purse, reviewing phone bills or looking at Christmas cards for return addresses.

But some situations require greater ingenuity. In one case, a man who drowned in the Willamette River had no identification other than a soggy wad of paper in his pocket. Gray put together the wet pieces of paper and found it was a store receipt. He took a photo of the man's clothes to the store, where he was told they appeared to be the same style as clothing worn by residents of a local mental health group home. Gray then asked police for a list of group homes in the area. One week after the



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man's body was found, Gray was able to identify him and notify the family.

Once family has been found, the deputy will prepare to make the notification. The first step is to try to learn the exact circumstances of death, since families typically want to know as many details as possible.

The deputy then will try to learn something about the family, Bigoni said.

"We are running into different ethnic groups where we need translators," he said, "especially Spanish" translators.

But language isn't the only issue. Different ethnic groups also have different customs, Bigoni said. He once walked into a immigrant home and saw two men cutting a body to let the bad spirits out. He didn't try to stop them, he said, because the death wasn't a homicide.

"We try to respect the cultural differences once they are explained," he said.

The next step is for the deputy to go to the family's home. The majority of death notifications are made in person.

The notification is typically short and to the point, Gray said, and always includes the word "died."

"We don't say the person has 'gone away' or 'passed on,'" he said. "Because people are in denial" and won't understand the person is dead.

Gray said he then gives the family a moment to let the news sink in. He never knows how they will react to the death.

"They'll either be stoic or go ballistic on you," Gray said. "I've seen people lying on the floor kicking and screaming."

Families have physically attacked deputies or blamed them for the death, Chief Deputy Felton said.

"They have to vent hostility to someone, and sometimes it's you."

On rare occasions, deputies will encounter a person who doesn't care. This usually happens when family members have been estranged.

"They say, 'So, what do you want me to do about it?'" Gray said.

When a family is distraught, the deputy will stay to comfort them, sometimes for several hours, Bigoni said.

"There are families you can't leave alone,"

he said. In those instances, the deputies will call in volunteers from Trauma Intervention Programs, which provides support to victims of crisis situations.

While deputies try not to make notifications by phone, there are some circumstances, especially homicides, that make it necessary.

"You know it will be on the news, but you can't beat the media person with the news," Gray said.

Bigoni and Gray worked as paramedics and police officers before joining the medical examiner's office. When they first were hired 17 years ago, they attended a training seminar to learn the process of grief and death. The curriculum included the Elisabeth Kubler-Ross classic "On Death and Dying."

But they say training alone couldn't prepare them for the emotional rigors of death notifications. Experience remains the best teacher. And in time the deputies have developed a necessary detachment.

"We can't emotionally become involved in every case," Bigoni said. "Because we deal with nothing but death."

Still, some cases trouble them.

"Children are tough," Bigoni said.

He remembers the time police found the head and hands of a murder victim in the trunk of a car.

"I had to tell the mother not only was her child dead, we didn't have all of him," he said.

On another case, Bigoni had to tell a 102-year-old woman that her 78-year-old son had been killed.

"She told me she had had 11 children, and they all died before her," he said. "Half were homicides."

The deputies rely on each other to get through the tough cases.

"We're pretty tight here and talk to each other," Gray said.

He remembers getting a call from a colleague who'd investigated a car accident that killed several children.

"We're both bawling on the phone," he said. Bigoni also relies on a strong Christian faith.

"You have to have a personal belief that death is not the end of it all," he said.

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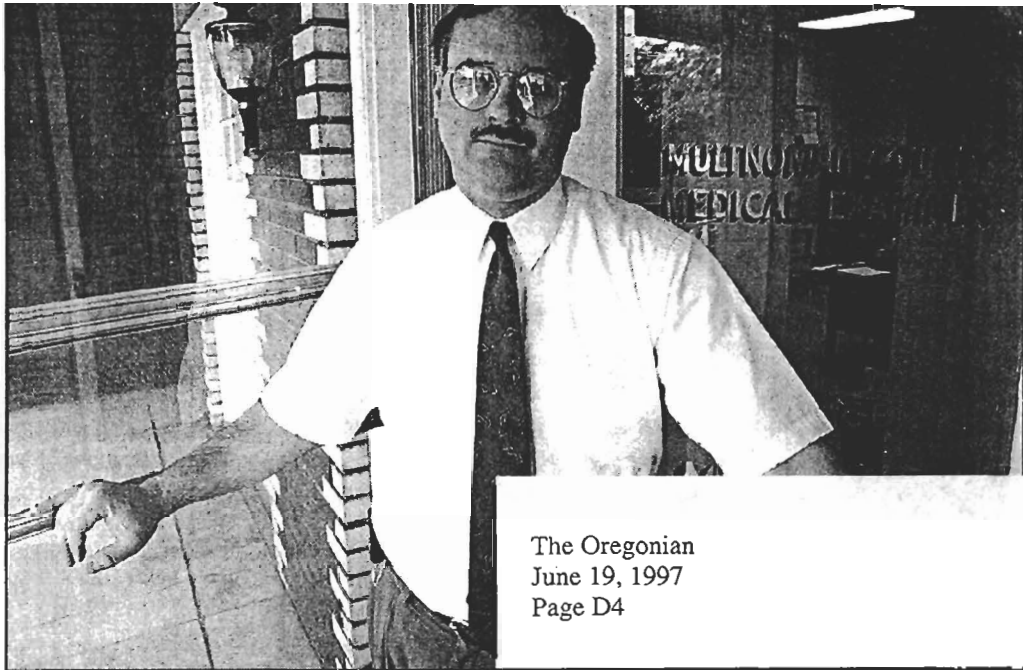
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