



OFFICE OF THE MEDICAL INVESTIGATOR

NEW MEXICO BOARD OF MEDICAL INVESTIGATORS

MINUTES OF GENERAL MEETING – May 27, 2025

**** VIRTUAL MEETING****

NM Office of the Medical Investigator
The University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center

BOARD PRESENT:

Patricia Finn, MD

Chair

Gina DeBlassie

Vice Chair

Kent House

Board Member

Josett Monette

Board Member

Dean, UNM School of Medicine

Cabinet Secretary, New Mexico Dept. of Health

Chair, New Mexico Board of Funeral Services

Cabinet Secretary, New Mexico Dept. of Indian Affairs

BOARD ABSENT:

Troy Weisler

Board Secretary

Chief, New Mexico State Police

ATTENDEES:

Amy Atiano

Kate Becker

La Vonda Bowens Woodard

Paul Carbajal

Anthony Cervantes

Felicia Cervantes

Lauren Dvorscak, MD

Ginnette Garcia

Adelina Gomez

Heather Jarrell, MD

Nancy Joste, MD

Sara Navarrette

Charlene Perales

Michael Richards

Kyla Sorensen

Associate Director of Operations, OMI

CEO, UNM Hospitals

Director of Operations, OMI

Administrative Assistant 3, OMI

Administrative Officer, OMI

Sr. Fiscal Services Tech, OMI

Deputy Chief Medical Investigator, OMI

HR Administrator 2, OMI

General Counsel, New Mexico Dept. of Indian Affairs

Chief Medical Investigator, OMI

Professor, Chair, UNM Dept. of Pathology

Associate University Counsel, UNM HSC

Administrative Assistant 3, OMI

EVP, UNM Health Sciences Center, CEO, UNM Health System

Supervisor, Fiscal Services, OMI

1. CALL TO ORDER AND CONFIRMATION OF QUORUM

Chair, Patricia Finn called the meeting to order at 10:02 AM and confirmed a quorum.

2. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA (action item)

Chair Finn asked for a motion to adopt the agenda. Mr. House **MOVED**. Secretary DeBlassie **SECONDED**. There was no discussion. Motion **CARRIED**.

3. VOTE TO APPROVE MEETING MINUTES (action item)

a. January 13, 2025, General Meeting

Chair Finn asked for a motion to approve the meeting minutes. Mr. House **MOVED**. Secretary Monette **SECONDED**. Motion **CARRIED**.

4. **REPORT FROM THE CHIEF (information item)**

Autopsy Table Project Updates:

Dr. Heather Jarrell introduced La Vonda Bowens Woodard, Director of Operations for OMI, to provide the board with an update on the autopsy table project. Before-and-after visuals were presented, showcasing significant improvements in both form and function, aligning the workspace with modern forensic standards.

Key points highlighted during the presentation included:

- Upgrades in Facilities Functionality: The modernization project aims to enhance the efficiency of operations within the facility.
- New features of Autopsy Tables:
 - Larger sinks have been installed to improve workspace sanitation.
 - Independent table movement has been introduced to enhance ergonomics and workflow.
- Safety Enhancement: The new autopsy tables feature single unit shutoff systems, which will enhance safety and prevent flooding in any departments within the building.
- Aesthetic Improvements: The overall suite has adopted a new color scheme that improves the quality of photography and documentation.

Legislative Updates HB 117, SB 352:

The board received an update on recent legislative efforts from Dr. Jarrell. The following key legislative initiatives were discussed:

- House Bill 117: Sponsors - Rep Joanne Ferrary, Rep. Luis Terrazas, Rep. Cynthia Borrego, Sen. Liz Stefanics.
 1. Permits Physician Assistants (PAs) to sign death certificates, an authority that Nurse Practitioners have already been granted.
 2. Mandates that primary care physicians (PCPs) must sign death certificates for natural deaths if they have treated the patient in the past 365 days. The OMI currently certifies over 300 death certificates annually due to PCPs failing to fulfill this responsibility, which places jurisdiction on OMI. This requirement is vital, as it allows for clear communication to the PCP that a death is classified as natural and necessitates their signature. This provision will take effect on June 20, 2025.
- Senate Bill 352: Sponsors – Sen. Katy Duhigg
 1. Makes autopsy photos not public record (no effect for law enforcement and judiciary purposes). Dr. Jarrell highlighted the sensitive nature of these photographs, which include explicit images of individuals, including children. The potential for these images to fall into the wrong hands raises significant concerns.
 - Passed unopposed through Senate Tax, Business & Transportation
 - Assigned to Senate Judiciary Committee, went unheard for consideration
 - Plan: Reintroduce 2026 Legislative Session

FY27 Funding Request:

The OMI is currently in the process of submitting a funding request for FY27. For FY26, the funding request was just over \$4 million, and the OMI received \$750,00 in recurring funding for that fiscal year. The funding request submitted for FY27 totals \$4.5 million, aiming to secure both the previous amount not received in FY26 and additional funds for necessary expenditures.

- Breakdown of FY27 Request:
 - Cremation Permit Fees: Request of \$500,000 aimed at reducing cremation permit fees from \$230 to \$200, aligning more closely with national averages while acknowledging that even at this rate, the fees will remain among the highest in the country.

- Airfare Travel for Court Appearances: Request of \$300,000 for airfare travel for forensic pathologists to testify in criminal court, as the Administrative Office of the Court has stopped covering plane travel, which has severely affected the OMI's ability to manage workloads given the limited number of pathologists.
- DNA Testing: A request for \$250,000 for DNA testing to handle an increased number of unidentified human remains as advancements in DNA technology have escalated testing needs, especially for genetic genealogy, which can cost up to \$8,000 per identification.

Chief Jarrell provided clarification on the effects of cremation permit fees, stating that the OMI is the only entity authorized to issue these permits to ensure proper investigation of deaths prior to cremation. The current cremation permit fees are considered by many as a burdensome tax on grieving families, reinforcing the need for the proposed reductions.



FY26 Request Details	
Market driven salary increases to retain current Forensic Pathologists	\$ 561,000.00
One year bridge funding to transition locum tenens to permanent Forensic Pathologists	\$ 1,247,958.00
4 Pathology Assistants to manage increased caseload	\$ 644,160.00
Reorganization cost to manage increased caseload	\$ 1,617,977.00

5. **BUDGET (information item)**

Dr. Jarrell provided a comprehensive overview of the OMI FY25 income statement projections for the period from July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025. Dr. Jarrell noted that state appropriations primarily cover salary expenses, while other operational costs are supported through generated revenue. The OMI's ability to generate revenue sets it apart from many other medical examiners' offices. Among the revenue sources, cremation permit fees were identified as the most significant, with projections indicating approximately \$3.1 million in revenue.

OMI FY25 Income Statement Projections 7/1/24 - 6/30/25		
Revenue		
Operating Revenue		
	State Appropriations: Recurring	\$10,955,600
	State Appropriations: One-Time for Capital Projects	\$3,465,100
	University Hospital Revenue	\$684,526
	Sandoval Regional MC Revenue	\$57,180
	Cremation Permits	\$3,471,610
	Other Sales and Services	\$1,398,658
	NYU RECOVER Cohort Autopsy Study	\$52,222
Intra University Activities		
	Gains from Sponsored Projects	\$42,223
	Transfer & Allocation	(\$3,603,663)
	FEMA Covid-Related Reimbursement	-
Total Revenue		\$16,523,456
Expenses		
	Salary & Fringe	\$10,849,144
	Locum Tenens - Forensic Pathologists	\$1,052,145
	Body Transportation	\$2,115,337
	Utilities & Plant Maintenance (SLD, Security, Kone Elevator, Pest Control, etc...)	\$545,775
	Equipment Warranties (CME annual license, Siemens, CT Scanner mis maintenance, etc...)	\$278,848
	Services (CLEAR database, records storage, PACS, Grief Consult, TriCore, etc...)	\$269,340
	Patient Care Expenses (PPEs, Body Bags, Formalin, etc...)	\$266,630
	NMS	\$140,996
	Other Expenses (Appr's Overhead, travel, FDMIs mileage reimb, Supplies, Banner tax, etc...)	1,605,206.17
Total Expenses		\$17,123,421
FY25 Projected Net Margin		(\$599,965)
FY23 Reserves		\$134,886
FY24 Reserves		\$599,965
FY25 Overall Projected Net Balance: Utilizing Only FY24 Reserves		\$ 0

6. **DEATHS ON TRIBAL LAND (information item)**

TITLE 7 HEALTH
CHAPTER 3 STATE MEDICAL INVESTIGATOR'S OFFICE
PART 2 POLICIES OF THE OFFICE OF THE MEDICAL INVESTIGATOR

7.3.2.10 REPORTING DEATHS:

D. Jurisdiction: The OMI will respond and take custody of a body in those reportable deaths that occur within the state of New Mexico, **excluding Indian reservations and military installations. On Indian reservations and military installations, the OMI will respond as investigative consultants when so invited and when reimbursed for the service as defined in a legal contract or by agreement.** In cases where the event leading to the death occurs on state land, but the individual is taken to a federal facility for emergency treatment, and is pronounced dead there, the death is to be reported to the OMI representative if the circumstances of the event are reportable, as defined in this manual.

Sara Navarrette, Associate University Counsel provided an update regarding the current administrative code concerning deaths on tribal land, emphasizing the importance of respecting tribal sovereignty. She clarified that the OMI does not have jurisdiction on any death that

happened on tribal land. The OMI can only take custody of deceased individuals on tribal land if invited and under a legal contractual agreement. This ensures that the OMI complies with the anti-donation clause of the New Mexico Constitution.

Ms. Navarrette mentioned that OMI and UNM Office of University Council (OUC) are working with the Indian Affairs Department to create a contract that would grant OMI jurisdiction over non-tribal members found on tribal land. She is awaiting further responses from the Indian Affairs Department on this matter.

Additionally, Ms. Navarrette and Dr. Jarrell are considering amendments to the language in the administrative code related to these issues.

Secretary Monette from the New Mexico Indian Affairs Department joined the discussion, noting that she brought her General Counsel, Adelina Gomez, to listen in. Monette indicated they have reviewed the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and have suggestions, particularly regarding the wording related to "tribal members" to include all Indian people, which would ensure broader legal coverage. She also mentioned the importance of the sovereign immunity clause in the MOU.

Monette confirmed their involvement in drafting the MOU and that each tribe would have the opportunity to review it with their legal counsel before finalizing any decisions. She received an inquiry about the status of the MOU and indicated that they would submit their feedback that afternoon.

Navarrette clarified that amending the language in the administrative code does not require a statutory change, which addressed a question raised during the discussion.

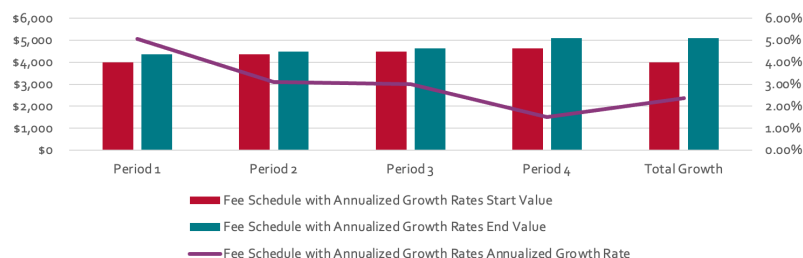
7. **PROPOSAL TO INCREASE AUTOPSY FEES (action item)**

Dr. Jarrell presented a proposal of increase autopsy fees, providing a slide with relevant data and highlight that the fees have remained unchanged since 2018. She requested the board to consider a 10% increase in fees, excluding cremation permit fees, which she recommended capping. Dr. Jarrell highlighted that this increase would result in a cumulative increase of about 1.5% per year since 2018, which is still below the industry standard increase of approximately 3.3%.

Fee Schedule with Annualized Growth Rates						
Period	Start Date	End Date	Start Value	End Value	Years	Annualized Growth Rate
Period 1	4/1/2015	12/22/2016	\$4,000	\$4,358	1.72	5.05%
Period 2	12/22/2016	12/13/2017	\$4,358	\$4,489	0.97	3.09%
Period 3	12/13/2017	12/18/2018	\$4,489	\$4,624	1.02	3.00%
Period 4	12/18/2018	5/27/2025	\$4,624	\$5,086	6.44	1.50%
Total Growth	4/1/2015	5/27/2025	\$4,000	\$5,086	10.15	2.37%

Fee Schedule with Annualized Growth Rates

Period: 4/1/2015 - 5/27/2025



Dr. Jarrell shared information regarding the current fee schedule, highlighting that there are no charges to the state for examination services related to deaths under OMI jurisdiction. She mentioned that proposed changes include increases for services outlined on page one and page two of the fee schedule and that miscellaneous fees would also see adjustments.

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Dr. Jarrell further clarified that OMI charges half of its hourly fee for consulting on U.S. district court cases, which she proposed should change to the full hourly fee due to the costs associated with sending medical staff to testify in those cases. She also proposed changing the charge for electronic transmission of reports from \$7 to \$0, in compliance with IPRA laws.

She presented data indicating the costs associated with conducting autopsies, stating that it costs about \$5,100 for homicide autopsies and \$3,100 for external exams, while the current charges are significantly lower. With the proposed 10% increase, the fees for these autopsies would be better aligned with the costs incurred.

Dr. Jarrell presented a slide outlining the handling fees, which include the time required for body reception, averaged costs for essential equipment such as scissor lifts, and associated staff time. She pointed out that the existing handling fee is \$85 and proposed an increase to \$100 to better align with necessary expenses and industry standards.

HANDLING FEE						
Position	Current FTEs	Right Sized FTEs	Average Annual Salary	Average Hourly Rate	Annual Cost-Based on Current FTEs	Annual Cost-Based on Right Sized FTEs
Accessioning Supervisor	-	-	\$ 106,211.00	\$ 51.06	\$ -	\$ -
Shift Supervisor (G. 12)	-	1.000	\$ 70,720.00	\$ 34.00	\$ 70,720.00	\$ 70,720.00
Accessioning Tech	7.000	7.000	\$ 43,264.00	\$ 20.80	\$ 302,848.00	\$ 302,848.00
Accessioning Tech Sr.	3.000	1.000	\$ 54,240.16	\$ 26.08	\$ 54,240.16	\$ 54,240.16
Total Salary					\$	\$ 427,808.16
Total Fringe					\$	\$ 171,123.26
Body Bags					\$	\$ 22,776.00
PPE					\$	\$ 5,000.00
Total Cost					\$	\$ 626,707.42
FY24 # of Released Decedents						5173
Current Handling Fee Rate						\$85
Current Total Revenue						\$439,705
Proposed Handling Fee						\$100
Proposed Total Revenue						\$517,300
Net Revenue						\$ (109,407.42)

Handling Fee	\$85	\$88	\$90	\$100	\$121
Total # of Cases	5173	5173	5173	5173	5173
Total Revenue	\$439,705	\$457,293	\$465,570	\$517,300	\$625,933

Following the presentation, Chair Finn opened the floor for questions. Secretary DeBlassie inquired about projected revenues from the increase, to which Dr. Jarrell approximated an increase of up to \$50,000 from autopsy fees.

Chair Finn then called for a motion to approve the proposed increase of autopsy fees by 10%. Secretary DeBlassie **MOVED**. Secretary Monette **SECONDED**. Chair Finn also voted in favor. With no further discussion or dissent, the motion was unanimously approved. Motion **CARRIED**.

8. PUBLIC COMMENT

No public comment.

9. VOTE TO CLOSE THE MEETING AND PROCEED IN EXECUTIVE SESSION

Chair Finn proposed moving to an executive session. Anthony Cervantes conducted the roll call:

Dean Finn – Yes

Secretary DeBlassie - Yes

Kent House - Abstained

Secretary Monette – Yes

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Chair Finn confirmed that with three out of four votes in favor, we are authorized to proceed into executive session. General session closed at 10:41 AM.

Board members and the following attendees were permitted to enter the executive session:

Kate Becker, CEO, UNM Hospitals

Heather Jarrell, MD, Chief Medical Investigator, OMI

Nancy Joste, MD, Professor, Chair, UNM Department of Pathology

Sara Navarrette, Associate University Counsel, UNM HSC

Michael Richards, EVP, UNM Health Sciences Center, CEO, UNM Health System

10. **RE-OPEN THE GENERAL MEETING**

The general meeting re-opened at 11:02 AM. Chair Finn certified that only the matters described in the executive session agenda were discussed during closed session and there is no final action to take.

11. **ADJOURNMENT**

Chair Finn asked for a **MOTION** to convene the meeting. Secretary DeBlassie **MOVED** to adjourn the meeting, Secretary Monette **SECONDED**. The meeting **ADJOURNED** at 11:03 AM