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Medico-Legal Autopsy and Violent Deaths in Nigeria: A Sociological Review of Outcomes and Challenges

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Abstract

The purpose of a medico-legal autopsy is to establish the cause, manner and time of a deceased. This provides scientific support for the prosecution of suspects involved in killings. Despite the fact that medico-legal autopsy can provide evidence for criminal offenses, there are challenges in the Nigerian criminal justice system regarding its utilisation. The study investigated the cause, manner and time of violent deaths to provide a scientific justification for prosecuting suspects. It undertook a sociological review of the outcomes and challenges of utilising medico-legal autopsy to investigate and prosecute violent deaths in Nigeria. Emphasis was on bridging the gap in existing knowledge in forensic sociology and criminal justice by addressing the role of medico-legal autopsies in violent deaths and evaluating how the complex web of institutional and procedural inadequacies impact on the strength of autopsy evidence in Nigeria. The study was guided by the assumptions of democratic policing and social contract theories. Data were obtained from secondary sources and analysed using content analysis. The findings showed that while autopsy results may significantly aid the criminal investigation process and the ensuing trial, poor financing, lack of forensic pathologists, poor working relationship between forensic experts and security personnel, weak laws and poor documentation are prevailing obstacles. These obstacles limit the effectiveness of medico-legal autopsy evidence and the prosecution of violent deaths in Nigeria. This study advocates the development of forensic structures, funding, upgraded medico-legal record keeping, and greater integrated practices and training of forensics and legal practitioners to improve the utility of autopsy evidence in criminal justice.

Keywords: Conviction Challenges; Outcomes; Medico-Legal Autopsy; Prosecutions; Violent Death

Introduction

Violent deaths remain a significant public health, security, and criminal justice concern across the world, particularly in the developing countries where weaknesses in forensic systems continue to undermine the effective administration of justice. The successful investigation of violent deaths rests primarily on the presence of reliable scientific evidence. Scholars, including Rahanra KV, et al. [1,2] pointed out that, recently, medico-legal autopsy reports have become important scientific method in the investigation and prosecution of violent deaths and convictions in many societies.

Medico-legal autopsy is the assessment of the deceased in a detailed and systematic manner in order to determine the

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cause, manner and time of death. Graham J, et al. [3] submits that it is within the job description of forensic pathologists to establish the cause, manner, and mechanism of death along with recording injuries and other findings that pertain to the criminal investigation. While an autopsy serves to establish the medical facts of death, an medico-legal autopsy reports provide objective scientific evidence that may corroborate witness testimony, serve to identify a suspect, provide a framework for the commission of a crime, and clarify the distinction between homicide of what may appear to be an accidental, suicidal or a natural death. Nwafor NN, et al. [4] observe that medico-legal autopsy reports are generally accepted to be the standard of inquiry of suspicious violent deaths, especially in cases where eyewitness testimony is either unavailable, or contradictory and unreliable.

As forensic investigations continue to develop, the role of medico-legal autopsy evidence in criminal proceedings continues to be strengthened. In some societies, medico-legal autopsy report is a major component of violent death cases and provide an evidence-based report for the court of competent jurisdiction [5,6]. In cases of homicide, manslaughter, or other violent acts, medico-legal autopsy reports assist the police in the identification of a victim, the determination of the time of death, the assessment of the victim's injuries, and the association of the suspect with a crime. Khan S, et al. [7] observe that quality autopsy evidence have contributed significantly in violent death investigations and prosecutions of suspects.

In spite of the advantages autopsy evidence provide, the application of forensic autopsy reports encounter numerous challenges. In developing countries, the integration of autopsy evidence into criminal procedures is severely constrained by the lack of an effective system for the conduct of criminal investigations and prosecutions. The state of forensic facilities, a lack of professional forensic pathologists and laboratory personnel, poor cooperation among agencies, delays in the proceedings, and socio-cultural perceptions on post-mortem examinations all limit the application of forensic autopsy reports [8,9].

Nwankwo CB, et al. [2,10] observe that there have been signs of increasing appreciation for forensic pathology over the last few years. Unfortunately, there is a lack of adaptation of medico-legal autopsy evidence to criminal investigations and prosecutions, particularly in Nigeria. Evidence suggests that autopsies are performed too long after the death, poorly documented, and poorly presented in criminal trials. These challenges may affect the success of violent death investigations, prosecutions and convictions [11,12].

In terms of challenges of medico-legal autopsy in violent death investigation, prosecution and conviction rates [13] in their study, documented the lack of reliance on forensic medical evidence by the courts. This has been followed by the description of weak interpretational and practical frameworks of medico-legal autopsy evidence and its application in criminal proceedings [14,15]. Likewise, the evidence-based justice system has been challenged by the courts' preference for eyewitness evidence despite the role of autopsy reports [16,17]. These challenges have been compounded by inadequate technology. A number of countries have advanced in the area of digital documentation and post-mortem imaging. However, Nigeria has fallen behind due to limited modern forensic technologies, poor infrastructure, inadequate support, and poor funding [18]. Forensic scientists are often placed in difficult environments that do not support the development of necessary scientific evidence of a high quality that meets the standards of contemporary judicial proceedings [19,20].

Furthermore, the frequent delays in the performance of autopsies, the disorganised management of case files, inadequate documentation, and a scarcity of expert evidence during court proceedings often undermine the quality and effectiveness of the findings of autopsies in the judicial system [21,22]. These functional inadequacies impede the court's ability to determine the guilt of the accused and of forensic pathology in furtherance and support of the prosecution of violent offenses. While challenges have been documented in the literature, studies have focused more on the investigatory aspects of forensic pathology, the autopsy process, and the challenges of forensic medicine in Nigeria.

Scholars like [11,13,23-26] have contributed to the study of forensic pathology and the medico-legal field, but have devoted less time to the sociological study of autopsy findings in the context of the criminal justice system. Limited research has been conducted on the challenges of proving the medico-legal autopsy findings, especially in the context of the violent death cases in Nigeria, and the impact of various constraints on the criminal justice system. In light of the foregoing, this study presents a sociological review on the outcomes and challenges of medico-legal autopsy regarding cases of violent deaths in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Medico-Legal Autopsy Evidence and Conviction Outcomes in Violent Deaths Prosecutions

Empirical studies on medico-legal autopsy evidence consistently demonstrate that autopsy findings constitute an important source of scientific evidence in violent death investigations and prosecutions. Although researchers generally agree that autopsy reports improve the quality of criminal investigations by objectively establishing the

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cause and manner of death, there is less empirical evidence regarding their contribution to conviction outcomes within the Nigerian criminal justice system. The reviewed literature reveals a progressive relationship among existing studies, beginning with the investigative value of forensic pathology and gradually expanding to the broader role of medico-legal reports in criminal investigations.

Using documentary evidence from forensic investigations, Obafunwa JO, et al. [26] analysed the use of forensic pathology in homicide and mass fatality cases in Nigeria. This study showed that criminal investigations are strengthened by autopsy findings in the identification of victims, the establishment of the cause and manner of death, and the development of the sequence of events in cases of suspicious death. The authors asserted that forensic pathology delivers neutral medical evidence that supports police investigations and enhances prosecution evidence. This study is one of the first to provide evidence on the vital role that medical autopsies play in criminal investigations; however, it focused on the role of forensic pathology in criminal investigations, and did not focus on the outcome of the judicial process. Therefore, the link between autopsy evidence and the outcome of convictions remained unexplored, which is the focus of the current research.

Building upon Faduyile FA, et al. [12, 26] studied violent death autopsy investigations using 569 medico-legal autopsy cases in Lagos State. The authors found that information articulated in autopsy reports significantly aided the criminal investigative process. However, and in spite of their contributions, Faduyile FA, et al. [12] remained largely descriptive. They noted the significance of autopsy findings to both the diagnosis and the investigations; but, they were silent on the influence of medico-legal autopsy evidence on the case outcome or whether it was linked to an increased conviction rate. The study was based on the question of how scientifically derived autopsy findings contribute to the successful outcome of criminal prosecutions.

Taking the discussion beyond forensic pathology to the general criminal investigation process, Khan S, et al. [17] investigated how medico-legal reports support criminal investigations. Their research showed that reports of a medico-legal investigation facilitate criminal investigations by establishing the cause of death, identifying the pattern of injuries, and elaborating on witnesses' statements. Such reports of a medico-legal investigation also help prevent mistakes that may occur during the investigation. The authors considered medico-legal reports as essential forensic tools that help improve the overall quality of criminal investigations. Their research builds on the work of Faduyile FA, et al. [12,26] and stresses the importance of medico-legal documents in the criminal justice system. However Khan S, et al. [7] concentrated mainly on the effectiveness of a criminal investigation, as opposed to the effectiveness of the criminal justice system. The study does not explain if a more effective investigation, supported by medico-legal reports, leads to a higher conviction rate, especially in the Nigerian criminal justice system. Also, the study has a lot of gaps regarding the practical aspects of the prosecution of violent deaths in Nigeria.

In summary, a noticeable evolution appears in the studies reviewed. Obafunwa JO, et al. [26] first identified the role of forensic pathology in homicide investigations. Then, Faduyile FA, et al. [12] showed how autopsies aid in the development of the scientific framework regarding death caused by violence, thus building on the work of [26]. Additionally, Khan S, et al. [7] discussed the value of medical-legal reports concerning criminal investigations. Even though previous studies agree on the scientific and investigative importance of medico-legal autopsies, they share a related empirical deficiency. Specifically, none of the studies addressed the impact of medico-legal autopsy evidence on the result of convictions for violent deaths in Nigeria. The studies under review also left the judicial importance of autopsy evidence largely unaddressed. The current study aims to address this empirical deficiency. Unlike the studies under review, this research examines the role of medical autopsy reports and their impact on conviction of violent deaths in Nigeria.

The Challenges Limiting the Application of Medico-Legal Autopsy Reports in Violent Death Investigations, Prosecutions and Conviction Outcomes

An examination of the use of medico-legal autopsy reports shows that forensic pathology is a central aspect of most criminal investigations and prosecutions. While forensic sciences are expanding, researchers point to many institutional, legal, and operational barriers that limit the effectiveness of autopsy evidence. The literature shows a positive relationship, with obstacles to forensic practice leading to inadequate criminal investigations and larger issues with forensic governance and legal structures. Much remains unknown regarding the legal implications of these challenges and the outcomes of violent death convictions in Nigeria.

In a study conducted by Omo-Aghoja LO, et al. [27], the obstacles to the development of forensic medicine in Nigeria was given attention. They highlighted lack of funds, trained forensic pathologists, forensic medicine and pathology facilities, and poor management as the main obstacles. The authors concluded that these obstacles hinder the delivery of medico-legal services. However, their study did not assess how the obstacles to forensic medicine in Nigeria affect the

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acceptance and use of medico-legal autopsy reports and the weight of evidence in the prosecution of violent deaths in Nigeria. This is the purpose of the present study.

Akhigbe AO, et al. [25] built on the institutional limitations described by Omo-Aghoja LO, et al. [27] by examining problems related to exhumation and death inquiries in Nigeria. The authors found delays in death inquiries, problems with the preservation of evidence, and an absence of evidence, coupled with poor management, all adversely affect the quality of the medico-legal examination. The degradation of biological evidence, coupled with procedural delays, adversely affects the utility of autopsy reports in the context of a criminal investigation. Their work supported the findings of Omo-Aghoja LO, et al. [27] to the effect that post-mortem examination and inquiry frameworks have their own set of limitations and problems, beyond that of forensic facilities. Their work dealt with problems of forensic examination, but they did not examine how these problems affect the outcome of prosecutions and the conviction rate. For this reason, the effect of compromised autopsy evidence on the justice system was not examined. This research intends to examine the effect of problems in post-mortem inquiries on the evidence contained in autopsy reports in cases of violent deaths in Nigeria.

Egenti I [28] expanded upon existing forensic work in criminal investigations by studying the challenges of forensic evidence in criminal investigations in Nigeria. The research identified the lack of scientific knowledge, insufficient forensic laboratories, and the inadequate training of investigators, and the lack of scientific evidence. Egenti's work builds on Akhigbe AO, et al. [25,30] in that the deficiencies of forensic pathology as described address the deficiencies of the criminal investigative system. However, the work was more of a general study of forensic evidence, and was less focused on the deficiencies of the medico-legal autopsy reports. And more importantly, the study did not focus on the influences of these factors on the judicial decisions and the sentencing of violent offenders. The present study seeks to address the missing element in knowledge of the Nigerian criminal justice system regarding the contribution of medico-autopsy evidence within the arena of forensic evidence.

Wakili A, et al. [29] further explored the issues surrounding Nigeria's legal framework for forensic evidence. The authors found several legal and procedural issues impacting the admissibility of forensic evidence. They argued that the governance of forensic evidence law and irregular legal and forensic governance of evidence adversely impact the use of forensic evidence in crime investigation and prosecution. Supporting the institutional and operational barriers, their findings add the legal dimension of the governance of forensic evidence. This study, however, took a doctrinal legal approach and does not elaborate on the impact of the legal gaps on the use of medico-legal autopsy reports in prosecuting violent deaths, nor does it examine the impact on case outcomes. This study aims to address the gaps in the legal and procedural frameworks regarding autopsy evidence and the judicial outcomes of violent death cases.

Apart from the Nigerian context, Bouzin JT, et al. [30] studied the challenges to sustainability of forensic science services across various jurisdictions. They identified inadequate funding and staffing, the lack of technology, and fractured cross-institutional coordination. Their findings seem to assume the position of [27,29] that a significant number of forensic science challenges affecting the judicial system are not jurisdictional. However, the study engaged with the challenges of Nigeria's forensic science services and forensic pathology. Therefore, its relevance to Nigeria is largely circumstantial. This study intends to address this gap by focusing the research to Nigeria in order to analyse how the challenges of integrating forensic science services systemically impact the usage of medical autopsy reports in violent death investigations, prosecutions and convictions.

In summary, there is a clear trajectory of scholarship on the obstacles confronting medico-legal autopsy evidence in various empirical studies. Omo-Aghoja LO, et al. [27] concentrated on the institutional challenges of forensic medicine. Akhigbe AO, et al. [2] focused on the challenges of the operational aspect of post-mortem examinations. Egenti I [11] focused on the lack of forensic evidence in support of crime.

Wakili A, et al. [29] argued challenges of forensic evidence to the criminal trial and the criminal justice system, and Bouzin JT, et al. [9] argued the challenges of forensic evidence in relation to the need to ensure sustainable forensic science services. The studies mentioned have contributed to the on-going discourse. The primary drawback of all these studies is their lack of consideration for the challenges of medical autopsy reports and the conviction of violent death offenders in Nigeria, which is the focus of the current research.

Theoretical Framework

The Democratic Policing Theory and the Social Contract Theory were the two main interrelated theories of focus for this study. The late twentieth century saw the emergence of the Democratic Policing Theory after the Goldstein H & Bayley DH [31,32] scholarly reviews describing the need for professionalism, transparency, and accountability in democratic policing, and the departure from coercive and authoritarian democratic systems. The theory posits that democratic policing functions within the rule of law,

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fairness, and accountability, and offers justice through the use of evidence. Democratic Policing Theory helps explain, in the context of this study, the role of medico-legal autopsy evidence in the investigations and prosecutions of violent deaths. Objective evidence of death in a scientific criminal investigation is in the autopsy report. Such scientific reports provide evidence of how, why, and what of violent deaths. When used appropriately, this evidence strengthens the accuracy of investigations, the credibility of prosecutions, and the fairness of trials.

Nigeria faces specific barriers to the successful application of this evidence. The challenges of developing forensic infrastructure, and the poor capacity and lack of documented evidence, as well as the delays in the generation of reports, are all examples of barriers that weaken the ability of policing and prosecuting agencies to implement justice based on evidence and thereby limit successful convictions in cases involving violent deaths. For these reasons, this theory is relevant, as it explains the function of forensic autopsy evidence in a democratic criminal justice system, and how these functions are adversely impacted by the weaknesses of democratic institutions. While the Democratic Policing Theory describes the internal operations and procedural expectations of the justice system, it does not fully address the negative broader implications of the ineffective delivery of justice on the confidence of society, and state legitimation. This gap, therefore, requires the application of Social Contract Theory, which moves the analysis beyond the justice system, to the relationship of the state with the society.

The Social Contract Theory associate with the classical thinking of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. These thinkers espouse that in exchange for the provision and protection of life and security, individuals cede certain liberties to the state. The state is legitimate only if it maintains these provisions [33]. This study applies Social Contract Theory to interpret the consequences of insufficient justice resulting from the poor application of medico-legal autopsy evidence in the Nigerian criminal justice system. There is a social contract that the state has an obligation to the victims of violent deaths to investigate the death and the perpetrator to deliver justice. The state's obligation to victims of violence is evidenced in autopsy reports. Unfortunately, the lack of infrastructure and severe inter-forensic legal collaboration, inadequate skills, and poor communication systems hamper the application of autopsy evidence. The result of these challenges is inadequate prosecution, lengthy legal processes, and wrongful-acquittal syndrome. The consequences of these systems challenges do not end with the individual legal case; they erode the confidence of the user in the justice system. Overtime, systematic failures cause the citizen's perception of the state's legitimacy to decline, as the state is mandated to deliver justice and safety [34-38].

In combination, these theories are relevant to this study and provides a framework for analysis. Democratic Policing Theory provides a means to understand the role of forensic autopsy evidence in improving transparency, accountability, and convictions in the criminal justice system. Social Contract Theory provides a means to understand the status of state legitimacy and public trust when the criminal justice system fails. The movement from one theory to the other is therefore justified by the need to move beyond institutional analysis to a more comprehensive understanding of how weaknesses in forensic practice ultimately affect the relationship between the state and society.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a documentary approach to examine the role of medico-legal autopsy reports and challenges to conviction outcomes in violent death prosecutions in Nigeria. Documentary research was considered appropriate because the study relied exclusively on existing documentary materials rather than primary data collected through questionnaire or interviews. Data were obtained entirely from secondary sources, including reported court judgments involving violent death prosecutions, published medico-legal autopsy reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, textbooks, conference papers, government publications, policy documents, legal statutes, law reports, reports of professional bodies, and publications of national and international organisations concerned with forensic science and criminal justice. Materials were selected based on a direct relationship with medico-legal autopsy evidence. To guarantee reliable results, only the most credible and verifiable sources were included. Content analysis was employed in this study as the method of data analysis.

Results and Discussion

Medico-legal autopsy reports provide the scientific objectivity which aids the criminal investigation process and judicial decision-making. Judicial decisions reviewed in this study have shown that autopsy reports help in establishing the cause, manner, and mechanism of violent deaths. This eliminates guesswork in the case of violent deaths and assists the court in the death-related decisions. In the absence of reliable eyewitness testimony and when the available evidence is circumstantial, the court can use medico-legal autopsy evidence in support of the prosecution and the determination of guilt. This shows that the presence of scientific evidence helps in the determination of criminal matters and reduces assumption.

Obafunwa JO, et al. [13] have supported this finding

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by stating that forensic pathology offers evidence that is medically and objectively inclined and assists in the reconstruction of violent acts. Similarly, Faduyile FA, et al. [12] indicate that medico-legal autopsies show evidence of injuries and pathological findings and strengthen violent death cases in courts. The current study corroborates the earlier studies by showing that the benefits of autopsy reports are not only in the investigation, but also in the prosecution and conviction outcomes. The finding also aligns with Khan S, et al. [7], who suggested that in Nigeria's criminal justice system, medico-legal reports improve investigations, minimise evidential discrepancies, and foster judicial efficiency.

The findings respond to the challenges that the operational, legal, and institutional barriers pose to the use of medico-legal autopsy reports to achieve convictions. Findings reveal that medico-legal autopsy evidence in courts are sometimes delayed, uncoordinated and poorly documented. It is also impeded by inadequate resources and infrastructure, as well as insufficient inter-agency relationships. The delay in the preparation of medico-legal reports adversely affects the evidential continuum and prolongs the criminal proceedings, therefore impeding the role of scientific evidence to prove a case beyond reasonable doubt. The results resonate with those of Omo-Aghoja L, et al. [27], who identified the paucity of forensic personnel as an acute barrier to the expansion of forensic medicine in Nigeria, and inadequate provision of resources and forensic institutional support as other critical barriers. The results also identified the preservation and the examination of forensic evidence, and the absence of procedural guidelines, as barriers to the quality of medico-legal examination, as reported by Akhigbe AO, et al. [2].

Egenti I [28] also identified inadequate technical and procedural barriers as constraints to the employment of forensic evidence in criminal investigations in Nigeria. Wakili A, et al. [29], identified legal and procedural constraints to the employment of forensic evidence in criminal investigations. The current study provides evidence that these institutional constraints have a more direct impact on sufficiency of conviction evidence, as compared to the constraints on sufficiency of criminal investigation.

The results also substantiate the claim that employing medico-legal autopsy reports improves transparency, accountability, and fairness in the criminal justice system. The reliance on autopsy evidence reduces the dependence on confessions, hearsay, and unfounded conclusions, since other judicial evidence must meet the requirement of being verifiable. The judicial system can, therefore, distinguish homicide from accidental death, suicide, or death due to natural causes, reducing wrongful convictions, and improving the confidence that judicial outcomes are just.

This evidence substantiates Democratic Policing Theory, which holds that a democratic approach to crime, should avoid coercion/subjection to speculation, and instead should rely on objective/legal evidence. Findings show that integrating medico-legal autopsy reports enhances professionalism and accountability in the justice system. This, coupled with the rigor of scientific evidence accompanying decisions to institute a prosecution, fosters systemic procedural justice and fairness. However, the study shows that, outside a context of inadequate forensic antipodes, the Democratic Policing model is practically unattainable, given that both investigators and prosecutors are unable to secure forensic evidence needed for a successful prosecution.

Moreover, the evidence shows that ineffective employment of medico-legal autopsy reports adversely impacts several other government systems. A combination of insufficient forensic capability, drawn out investigations, inconsistent expert testimony and a string of unsuccessful prosecutions, erodes public confidence in the justice system and the legitimacy of the state. Untested and untried violent death investigations lead to a breakdown of public confidence in the state and the conviction that the state has lost the ability to safeguard citizens. This is a huge step in proving that Social Contract Theory can be applied to the Nigerian context. Social Contract Theory assumes that states attain legitimacy when they provide justice and security to their citizens. Where scientific evidence to support the prosecution of a crime is either not sufficiently developed or poorly applied, the demand for justice is not fulfilled. Thus, the sub-optimal application of medico-legal autopsy evidence not only affects the individual criminal cases, but also the case of the people's faith in the enforcement of law, the credibility of the judiciary, and the relationship between the state and the people.

In sum, medico-legal autopsy evidence is an important factor of the prosecution of violent deaths in Nigeria. They aid in the criminal investigation process and improve the outcome of criminal trials. The potential of medico-legal autopsy evidence is stifled by the institutional and legal frameworks that exist in Nigeria. Confronting these challenges will not only improve the outcome of criminal trials, but will strengthen the foundations of democracy, improve public confidence in the criminal justice system, and enhance the rule of law. This research also answers a significant gap in existing research by establishing a clear empirical connection between medico-legal autopsy evidence, the outcome of criminal trials, and institutional legitimacy in the Nigerian criminal justice system.

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Conclusion

This study presented a sociological review of the outcomes and challenges of medico-legal autopsy in Nigeria. It was a documentary research that relied on secondary sources and content analysis. The study found that medico-legal autopsy reports provide crucial scientific evidence that strengthens criminal investigations, aids prosecutorial discretion, and supports judicial confidence in the cause, manner, and mechanics of violent deaths. The results of the study indicate that evidence from autopsy examinations strengthens witness testimony, addresses evidence deficiencies, and helps courts obtain pertinent medical information for case adjudication, thereby resulting in increased conviction rates.

Results of the study further indicate that the ability of medico-legal autopsy reports to generate evidence is limited by numerous unresolved problems such as a chronic absence of forensic infrastructure, shortage of skilled and trained forensic pathologists, a chronic backlog in the performance of post-mortem examinations, poor record keeping, a lack of collaboration and coordination among various organisations and agencies, and poor and unpredictable use of forensic evidence in courts. These problems frequently result in the waste of time which may actually compromise the prosecution of violent deaths. The results support some elements of the Democratic Policing Theory. The elements of the theory contend that the administration of criminal justice is dependent upon the availability of objective scientific evidence; the availability of such evidence fosters a system of criminal inquiries and prosecutions that is more accountable, transparent, and equitable. The results of the study also support the Social Contract Theory because the improper use of medico-legal autopsy evidence diminishes the public's trust in the justice system and decreases the state's right to kill by safeguarding the presumed right to life.

The main takeaway of this research is that developing forensic pathology services must be viewed beyond a technical perspective to be a crucial part of the administration of criminal justice. The research postulates that improving the quality, accessibility, and the use of the medico-legal autopsy reports will improve conviction rates, decrease wrongful acquittals, and improve procedural justice and will provide Nigerians greater confidence in the criminal justice system. The research also adds to the body of knowledge and forensic scholarship by moving beyond the restrictive forensic scholarship on the investigative role of the autopsy report and provides empirical evidence on the linkage of autopsy reports to conviction in the prosecution of violent deaths. It also combines forensic pathology with the analysis of criminal justice and governance by showing that the optimal use of forensic science evidence has a bearing on the efficacy of the judiciary and the legitimacy of institutions. Other scholars should build on this documentary research and carry out studies on the views and experiences of forensic pathologists, police, prosecution and defence counsel, and judges to enhance the understanding of the use of medico-legal autopsy evidence in the Nigerian criminal justice system.

Policy Recommendations

The creation of a National Violent Death Review Repository by the Federal Government would address the need for a central place that combines anonymous findings of medico-legal autopsies with criminal justice outcomes. This repository would go beyond a forensic archive by allowing researchers to examine how autopsy evidence impacts investigations and subsequent outcomes, such as the filing of charges, acquittals, convictions, and dismissals of cases. This evidence and outcome tracking system would address policy gaps and provide the necessary data regarding gaps in the criminal justice system and provide insight needed when applying forensic evidence to the adjudication of cases. This repository would be the first system implemented in Nigeria to provide an assessment of the societal consequences of medico-legal autopsies outside of the assumptions of their medical functions.

Medical and law schools and police training facilities should collaborate and create Interdisciplinary Medico-Legal Case Review Clinics. These clinics should provide ongoing review of closed cases of violent death and be staffed by forensic pathologists, criminologists, attorneys, law enforcement investigators, and members of the judiciary. These clinics, unlike standard forms of professional education, would assess how the outcome of a judicial process and the evidence presented in an autopsy report were influenced by the interaction of various state institutions. This would provide an understanding of the gaps in the usage of medico-legal evidence when prosecuting cases of violent death.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article did not encounter any conflict of interest.

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