

**SENATE BILL REPORT**

**SB 5542**

**AS REPORTED BY COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES,  
FEBRUARY 26, 1991**

**Brief Description:** Requiring autopsies for suspected SIDS deaths.

**SPONSORS:** Senator Roach.

**SENATE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES**

**Majority Report:** That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5542 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Roach, Chairman; L. Smith, Vice Chairman; Craswell, and Talmadge.

**Staff:** Joanne Conrad (786-7190)

**Hearing Dates:** February 12, 1991; February 26, 1991

**BACKGROUND:**

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is the leading cause of death for infants in the first year of life. Its etiology is unknown. In Washington State, 187 babies died of SIDS in 1990, typical of the average one death per 500.

Currently, the decision of whether or not to autopsy in cases of suspected SIDS deaths is made on a county-by-county basis, at the discretion of the county coroner or medical examiner.

For a multiplicity of reasons, the medical profession (National Institute of Health), SIDS professionals, law enforcement and SIDS organizations recommend a uniform policy or protocol of requiring autopsy in all cases of suspected SIDS death, citing as reasons the need to learn more about the causes and prevention of the condition, the psychological value of certainty in the parental grief and recovery process, and the estimate that as many as two out of three infant child abuse deaths that go undetected are mislabeled as "SIDS deaths," eluding law enforcement efforts and endangering other children in the abuser's environment.

A recent survey of Washington coroners and medical examiners, with 30 of the 39 counties responding, indicated that 19 counties (63 percent of respondents) consistently autopsied.

**SUMMARY:**

Statutory definition of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is included. Prompt autopsy in all cases of suspected SIDS death

is mandated. Statutory immunity from civil liability for all complying coroners and medical examiners is provided.

**EFFECT OF PROPOSED SUBSTITUTE:**

Development of a special curriculum for training coroners, investigators, prosecutors and first responders in understanding and investigating sudden unexplained child deaths is established as a responsibility of the Washington Death Investigation Council, working with the SIDS NW Regional Center, the SIDS Foundation and other interested groups.

The scope of the target population is expanded to include all types of sudden and unexplained child death up the age of three. Autopsy is no longer mandated. The importance of appropriate death scene investigation and sensitivity in dealing with the child's family and care-provider will be emphasized. The training module will be made available to associations, for geographically mobile distribution, and will also be available at the Criminal Justice Training Commission.

**Appropriation:** none

**Revenue:** none

**Fiscal Note:** available

**TESTIMONY FOR:**

Death scene investigation in Sudden Infant Death Syndrome cases is more important in making cause of death determinations than is autopsy. First responders, coroners and others in contact with SIDS parents need more specialized education and need to act with sensitivity, helping such parents contact support groups and services as soon as possible. Autopsy, when sensitively conducted, can have a beneficial effect on the family's grief and recovery process, as well as providing forensic information that may be otherwise unobtainable.

**TESTIMONY AGAINST:** None

**TESTIFIED:** PRO: Lauren Valk Lawson, SIS NW Regional Center; Amy Lydum, Washington State Chapter, National SIDS Foundation; Judy Arnold, Thurston County Coroner