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Of what use are postmortem reports?

Back in July 2010 when we were hit by terrorists from Al Shabaab in the twin bombings at Kyadondo Rugby Club and at the Ethiopian Village Restaurant in which we lost 76 innocent lives, we had to carry out postmortems for all the bodies. This raised questions from friends and relatives wanting to know of what use the postmortem report is.

There was wailing everywhere, more so, in Mulago National Referral Hospital where many of the bodies were taken amidst protests from family and friends.

Personally, I got attacks from wailing, hurting and grieving parents, relatives and devastated onlookers who were angry that we were wasting their time and money taking dead bodies for postmortem as if we did not know the cause of their death. To them, and I think they were honest; the 76 lives were lost due to the bombs thrown at

these victims. “What else do the Police want”? They bitterly asked.

Someone could have died a couple of years back and we discover that it is absolutely necessary to determine our investigation. In that case, an inquest will be ordered. How about its importance beyond investigations? It is not as obvious as I earlier thought, having listened to so many people across my career path.

In the real language of professionals, this postmortem report is called an autopsy, which is defined as “a highly specialised surgical procedure that consists of a thorough examination of a corpse by dissection to determine the cause of death or to evaluate any disease or injury that may be present for research or educational purposes”.

Any homicide, meaning any loss of life is worth an investigation to establish exactly what happened and how to apportion responsibility. Many people have been thought to have committed



suicide yet they have not. Investigations have in some cases found that these victims died at the hands of criminals in or outside their close circles, like relatives, spouses or workmates.

Homicides are possibly a result of poison used, strangulation, hitting by a hard metallic object or a gunshot, enlarged internal body organs or bleeding that never stops. It could be more than these enumerated, all bringing about questions that require answers.

In prosecution, the trial judge is not interested in tears and emotional outbursts from the victims that often flock courtrooms or from sweet stories from the investigators. S/he is interested in evidence adduced before court. For example, if someone died as a result of bleeding from gunshots; which type of gun was used to shoot the victim? How many bullets were discharged/ fired to warrant the victim's death? Where is the killer weapon? Was it exhibited? In this, ballistic experts help us a great deal to fill the gaps and enable effective prosecution. Once harmonised with the autopsy report, we have a perfect piece of work before a trial judge.

Ordinarily, criminals take their time. They plan for a long time. By the time of execution of their evil mission, they are sure they will hardly be found. But very often, they are caught. And in many cases, they have been successfully prosecuted. Reason is, they leave traces which lead us to break through thereby

connecting a suspected criminal to the crime by placing him/her at the crime scene and successfully adducing this evidence before a trial judge.

For anyone to be found guilty of any offence committed, the state (the police and DPP) must prove beyond reasonable doubt that it is suspect A and not AB that committed the offence. Beyond prosecution, you need it (from pathologists). You need the death certificate too (from Uganda Registration Services Bureau). All these will help you in future. For example, they will help you in the administration of the estate of your deceased relative or parent. I have seen cases where huge chunks of land are transacted in suspicious circumstances where sale agreements are purportedly signed by the dead person long after s/he was buried. Visiting the marked grave yard may never help at all. Those involved could have marked the grave yard with intentions to cheat their victims.