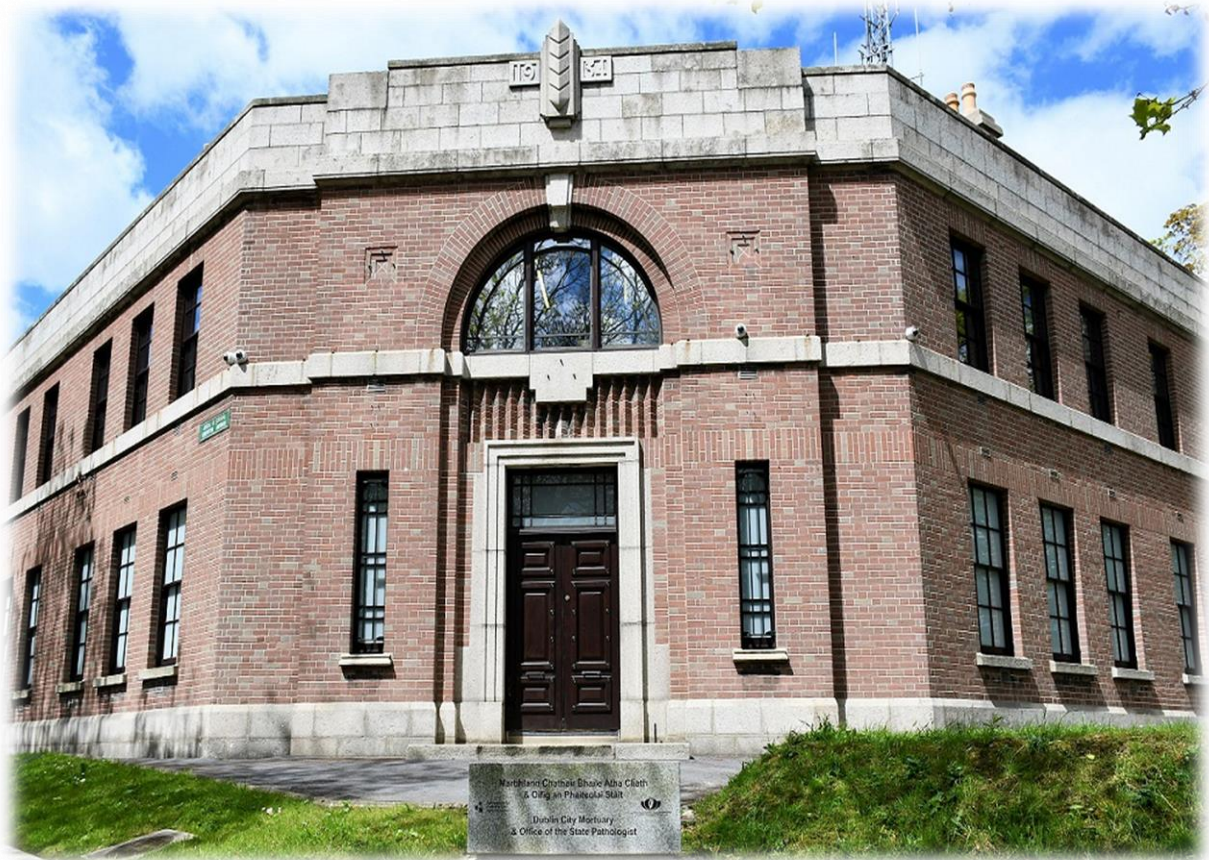


# OFFICE OF THE STATE PATHOLOGIST

*Annual Report 2024*



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## Foreword

**By Professor Linda Mulligan**

### **Chief State Pathologist**

I am delighted to present the 2024 Annual Report for the Office of the State Pathologist (OSP).

In September 2024, I celebrated 10 years at the OSP and Department of Justice. Reflecting on that time, I realised how far we had come and how much the forensic pathology service has evolved.

Dr. SallyAnne Collis, Dr. Heidi Okkers and Dr. Yvonne McCartney are my state pathology colleagues and Dr. Margot Bolster continues in her crucial support as Assistant State Pathologist. Their combined expertise, diligence and focus has allowed us to make large strides in internal development including ongoing practice improvement and quality assurance. It has also allowed us to focus on improving the international profile of the OSP through publications, involvement in scientific meetings and supporting research with academic institutions.

Our priority as always is our forensic work and 2024 saw the highest number of state cases in 10 years. Increased clustering of cases, inquest and criminal court attendances, reduced availability of mortuaries and/or mortuary staff and increased travel to cases outside Dublin have all affected the availability of pathologists at times. However, the team continues to adapt and strive to meet their responsibilities regardless.

The OSP staff continue their efficient and reliable support in order to maintain the high quality service expected of the OSP.

The laboratory has also dealt with a large increase in workload, particularly over the last two to three years. All histology pertaining to neuropathology in state cases has been absorbed into the OSP laboratory. The preliminary figures in a recent OSP internal audit show a doubling of the workload from 2015 to 2024. A summer intern has successfully supported the senior laboratory scientist for the last two years and will again in 2025, but a more permanent solution will be needed imminently.

Something that will have a major impact on the OSP and national autopsy practice in general will be the reform of the coronial service which forms part of the new [Programme for Government Ireland 2025 - Securing Ireland's Future](#).

The establishment of a resourced, sustainable coronial autopsy service as part of this reform would serve to improve and strengthen the national forensic pathology service.

The OSP will continue to drive change and growth through ongoing engagement with the Department of Justice, Coroners, Department of Health, HSE and Faculty of Pathology RCPI and to provide advice and expertise as needed.

*Linda Mulligan*

**Chief State Pathologist**

## Introduction

The Office of the State Pathologist (OSP) is a non-statutory agency established on an administrative basis under the aegis of the Department of Justice. The OSP provides a national, year round, forensic pathology service in Ireland. Forensic pathology is the discipline of medicine that deals with the determination of the cause of death for legal purposes. Forensic pathologists are medical doctors who are trained in anatomical pathology, histopathology and the interpretation of injuries at post mortem examination.

The OSP provides independent expert advice on matters relating to forensic pathology and performs post mortem examinations (PMEs) in criminal, suspicious or unusual deaths. These are known colloquially as “State” cases. The forensic pathologists provide a post mortem report to the relevant Coroner in such cases. They attend at the inquest and at any court proceedings arising out of a Garda investigation. The OSP also performs PMEs in non-suspicious deaths for the Dublin District Coroner on a rotational basis, when the forensic workload allows it.

The Office of the State Pathologist is headed by the Chief State Pathologist, Prof. Linda Mulligan, She is assisted by three State Pathologists, Dr. Heidi Okkers and Dr. SallyAnne Collis and Dr. Yvonne McCartney. Dr. Margot Bolster based in Cork continues to assist as a locum Assistant State Pathologist.

The forensic pathologists are supported in their work by a senior laboratory analyst (medical scientist) and five administrative staff.

as well as a wide range of natural and unnatural deaths, for example road traffic collisions, accidents and drug-related deaths.

## Other Responsibilities

The OSP also deals with a significant number of other types of cases. These include skeletonised remains, which may require the expertise of a forensic anthropologist; cold case reviews and referred cases - these are cases that are referred to the OSP for a further professional opinion either from An Garda Síochána, coroners or from outside the Irish jurisdiction (e.g. Northern Ireland, UK).

On a case-by-case basis, and following discussion with the relevant Coroner, the forensic pathologists may deem it necessary for another forensic specialist to be involved in the investigation of a suspicious death. The specialist areas most frequently required are Neuropathology, Paediatric/Perinatal Pathology, Forensic Anthropology, Post Mortem Toxicology, Forensic Archaeology, and on occasion, Forensic Entomology.

## Core Work of OSP

The main activity of the OSP is to undertake PMEs in cases of sudden, unexplained death where a criminal or suspicious element is present. In approximately 3% of cases in 2024, this also involved a scene visit. The pathologists deal with homicides,

## Out of Office Commitments

A significant proportion of the pathologists' work involves out-of-office activities, such as attendance at inquests and the criminal or civil courts. The OSP is also involved in the provision of expert advice to various groups



(e.g. Standing Committee for Coroners PMEs, Faculty of Pathology RCPI, National Drug-Related Death Index, Government bodies and Commissions).

## Education

Pathologists at the OSP provide teaching to An Garda Síochána and the Military Police as part of their death investigation training. Teaching of medical students at both undergraduate and post-graduate level is an important part of their service. Prof. Linda Mulligan was appointed as a clinical professor in the UCD School of Medicine in 2022. Between September 2023 and September 2025, the OSP is the enterprise partner, and UCD is the academic supervisor, of a post-doctoral research fellow in conjunction with Research Ireland. The title of the project is Searching for Missing Homicide Victims: Developing a Data Driven Model. The OSP is also closely affiliated with the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland (RCSI) and provides lectures for Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, National University of Ireland Galway and National University of Ireland Cork. Medical students, forensic science students and qualified doctors often spend time attached to the OSP as part of their required electives.

## Location

The Office of the State Pathologist is located on Griffith Avenue in Dublin 9. Following a joint refurbishment project, the OSP relocated to this site in July 2016. The site was formerly the Whitehall Garda Station. The OSP is located on the first floor of the building, while the Dublin District Mortuary is on the ground floor. All histological material, including associated neurohistology for the State forensic cases, is processed on-site in Whitehall in the OSP's histopathology laboratory. The State Laboratory in Backweston, Co Kildare, processes toxicology samples. Post mortem radiology in Dublin is provided through an agreement between the Dublin District Coroner and the Mater Misericordiae University Hospital.

Outside of Dublin, access to radiology is dependent on available and agreeable radiology staff, but in general can be provided.

## Governance

During 2019, major structural reform took place in the Department of Justice & Equality with the implementation of a Transformation Programme. The Programme moved the Department from a traditional divisional structure to a streamlined functional model with the core work being aligned under two separate pillars: Criminal Justice and Civil Justice and Equality, both supported by a third central pillar comprising the enabling and co-ordination functions of Corporate Affairs, Transparency and European Affairs. This led to reporting changes for the OSP who now, in the main, come under the Criminal Justice pillar.

The OSP produces its own Business Plan and Risk Register each year under the guidance of the Department. The Chief State Pathologist and the Department sign an Oversight Agreement, every two to three years and, following on from this, a more targeted annual Performance Delivery Agreement is created.

## Overview of 2024

### Overall Caseload: 394

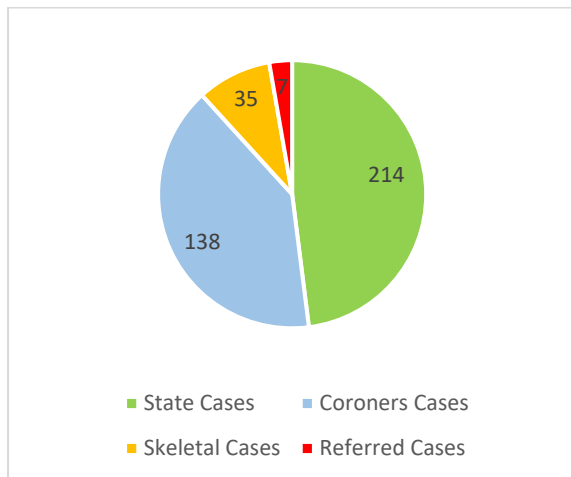
Forensic casework is the core workload of the Office of the State Pathologist. A comprehensive recording system provides a detailed overview of the casework handled by the OSP. It also ensures that all of its records are retained and stored according to Health Service Executive guidelines and in line with General Data Protection Regulations.

During 2024, 394 cases were dealt with by the OSP (this figure was 400 in 2023, 417 in 2022 and 327 in 2021). The state forensic

cases comprised 54% of the total caseload (214 cases).

Figure 1. below shows the breakdown of the total caseload into the four different case types (state forensic cases, non-suspicious cases, skeletal remains and referred cases).

**Figure 1:**  
**Total Cases January - December 2024**



State forensic cases may, following discussion with the crime scene examiners, investigating gardaí and coroner, involve a visit to the scene of death. This is decreasing due to advanced technologies used by crime scene investigators and occurred in only 3% of state cases in 2024.

### **Dublin District Coroner Non-Suspicious Cases:**

The OSP, at the direction of the Dublin District Coroner, carried out 138 adult non-suspicious PME's.

### **Skeletonised Specimens:**

Of the 35 cases of skeletonised remains referred to the OSP, 17 were identified as human bones, 17 were identified as animal bones and one was neither.

A forensic anthropologist was involved in 24 cases. Of the 17 human skeletal remains, 7 were classified as ancient/historic and, where appropriate, were referred onto the

National Museum of Ireland. 3 of the cases were classified as modern (i.e. potentially of forensic relevance). In the remaining 7 cases the age of the human skeletal remains was uncertain.

### **Referred Cases:**

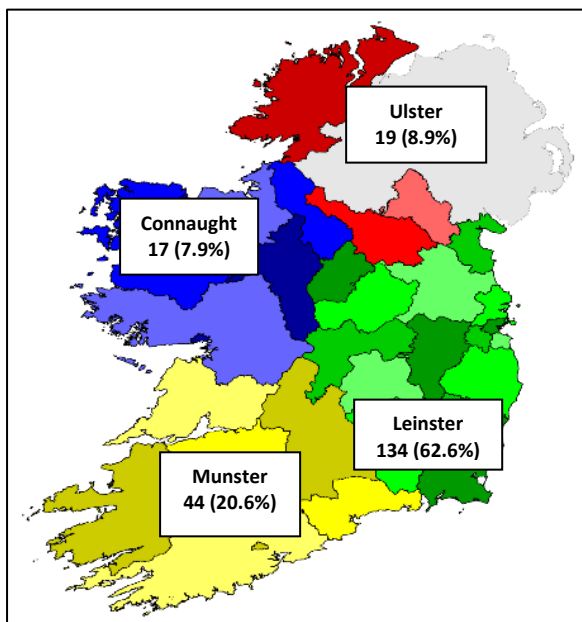
7 cases were referred to the OSP for expert opinion. The amount of material to be reviewed in these cases often required a significant input from the individual pathologist. Review of these cases can include liaising with the referring Gardaí (including the Serious Crime Review Team), solicitors or coroners, reviewing all relevant records and compiling a report. These cases may also involve a court appearance (usually a coronial inquest). On average, each case requires approximately 10 hours work, although some cases may require almost double that amount of time. This amounted to a minimum of 70 hours in 2024.

### **National Service - Geographical Spread of Cases:**

The OSP provides a national forensic pathology service in Ireland and the case spread encompasses a wide geographic area. Figure 2. shows the distribution of State cases throughout the country in 2024.

The figures below reflect the location where the PME's occurred.

**Figure 2:**  
**Distribution of State Cases in Ireland**  
**2024**



104 post mortem examinations were performed in Dublin (100 in Dublin District Mortuary, 2 in a Children's Health Ireland Hospital, 1 in the National Maternity Hospital, Holles Street and 1 in St. Colmcilles Hospital Loughlinstown). There were 16 cases (of the 100) performed in DDM from coronial districts other than Dublin due to lack of availability of mortuary facilities or mortuary staff.

A further 36 cases were performed within an 80km radius of the capital (Drogheda, Tullamore, Naas, Navan and Portlaoise).

### All Year Round Service:

The OSP provides an on-call service 7 days per week, 365 days a year. There is always a forensic pathologist on duty. The on-call rota is provided to An Garda Síochána and to all Coroners on a continual basis.

On two days last year, 4 post mortem examinations were carried out on the same day. On one of the days, two pathologists were involved, each performing 2 PME in the same mortuary. On the other day, one pathologist carried out PMEs on 3 cases of skeletal remains in the same mortuary, while

a second pathologist performed a PME elsewhere in the country.

On four days last year, 3 post mortem examinations were performed on the same day. This included another 3 cases of skeletal remains with PMEs carried out by the same pathologist on one day (separate to those outlined above). On two of these days, three pathologists each performed 1 PME in different mortuaries. On one day, one pathologist performed 2 PMEs in the same mortuary and a second pathologist performed 1 PME in another mortuary.

On 26 days last year, 2 PMEs were performed on the same day. Six of these days involved a pathologist having to travel to two different mortuaries to perform the PMEs.

As the OSP does not have its own mortuary facility to allow for centralisation of the forensic service, it is the current practice in Ireland that the pathologists must travel to various HSE run mortuaries around the country to perform State forensic cases. The logistics of organising this are becoming increasingly challenging as the HSE mortuaries are also dealing with increased workloads, staff shortages and resource issues.

The mortuary for the PME is usually located in or near the coronial jurisdiction where the death occurred. Four pathologists were based in Dublin and one locum assistant pathologist was based in Cork.

In 2024, a total of approximately 550 hours were spent solely on traveling to perform a state post mortem examination. This equates to 73.3 (7.5 hour) working days, or 14.5 working weeks (excluding weekends).

Out-of-office commitments such as attendance at inquests and the Criminal Courts of Justice to provide expert advice on causes of death amounted to approximately 10 working days for the pathologists during 2024. While giving evidence remotely is possible in some courtrooms, it is not always an option, particularly in smaller courts and some peripheral coronial jurisdictions. In person attendance is often requested by

senior counsel for evidence provision at a criminal court.

As part of their teaching role, the pathologists also spent approximately 174 hours lecturing in academic institutions as well as to An Garda Síochána and the Military Police. In 2024, one of the state pathologists developed and delivered an Ethics in Laboratory Medicine course for RCPI, which required 55.5 hours of work.

In addition, the OSP facilitates electives for undergraduate and postgraduate medical students and masters in forensic science students. The students attend the OSP for a number of weeks and shadow the forensic pathologists as well as completing a project. In 2024, this equated to a further 205 hours approximately of supervision and guidance from a consultant forensic pathologist.

## Stakeholder Engagement

Working with external stakeholders ensures good communication and working relationships. Prof. Mulligan continues to be a board member of the Faculty of Pathology and a member of the Histopathology Standing Committee at the Royal College of Pathologists. She also sits on the Standing Committee for Coronial PMEs, the Advisory Group to the HSE for the Mortuary Improvement Programme and advises the Forum for Stakeholders group relating to Missing Persons. Dr. Okkers and Prof. Mulligan are involved in planning for mass fatality events. Dr. Okkers co-ordinates teaching and guest lectures as well as examinations in RCSI. Dr. Collis continues as chair of the Autopsy Quality Improvement Committee, for the National Histopathology Quality Improvement Programme and co-ordinates our research electives. Dr. McCartney has been involved with RCPI to develop and deliver an Ethics in Laboratory Medicine course three times annually and is the co-ordinator for our annual Trinity College medical lectures.

## Financial Information

The Office of the State Pathologist is funded under the Department of Justice's Vote (Vote 24), for which the Department's Secretary General is the Accounting Officer. The Accounting Officer is responsible for the safeguarding of public funds and property under the Department's control. External scrutiny is provided through the submission and analysis of the Appropriation Accounts to the Comptroller and Auditor General and ultimately to the Oireachtas through the Public Accounts Committee.

In 2024 OSP received a total budget allocation of €1,672,000 (€1,339,000 for Pay and €333,000 for Non-Pay). The OSP's expenditure was €1,558,631, of which €1,341,288 was spent on Pay and €217,343 on Non-Pay.

The expenditure is broken down between pay and non-pay costs in Figure 3 below.

The locum assistant pathologist is not on the payroll and therefore appears as non-pay costs.

**Figure 3:  
Breakdown of Expenditure in 2024**

	2024 Budget Allocation	2024 Actual Outturn
<b>Pay</b>	€1,339,000	€1,341,288
<b>Non-Pay</b>	€333,000	€217,343
<b>Net Total</b>	€1,672,000	€1,558,631

## Protected Disclosures

In accordance with section 21 (1) of the Protected Disclosures Act, 2014, the Office of the State Pathologist adopted the Department's Protected Disclosures policy and has communicated it to all the staff. In line with the reporting requirements, it is confirmed that there were no protected disclosures reports received in 2024.



## Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty

Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act, 2014 establishes a positive duty on public bodies to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality and protect the human rights of staff and persons to whom services are provided. The OSP is cognisant of human rights and equality issues, medical ethics and the dignity of the deceased.

In the Oversight Agreement 2023 – 2025 between the Department of Justice and the Office of the State Pathologist the OSP committed to participate constructively in any Department-led sectoral initiatives in the area of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). The OSP promotes the EDI resources within the Department which includes all EDI communications, EDI Portal, the Department EDI Strategy and EDI Training.

## Environmental and Energy Awareness

The OSP's obligation to report annually to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) on energy consumption is met by the Department of Justice, who report on our behalf.

Environmental issues are a standing item at all OSP meetings. Compostable cups are used at drinking fountains, waste segregation is in operation and there are designated electric vehicle charging spaces. Throughout 2024 every effort was made to recycle where possible and the OSP continued to reduce its paper footprint.

## Governance and Internal Controls

The Office of the State Pathologist is independent in its functions and reports to the Department of Justice in terms of governance.

Oversight Agreements between the Office of the State Pathologist and the Department of Justice are put in place every two to three years. Annual Performance Delivery Agreements are in place between the Office of the State Pathologist and the Department of Justice. Copies are available on [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie). The Chief State Pathologist provides a Compliance Statement in respect of the work of the OSP to the Minister for Justice in accordance with the 2016 Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies.

Regarding compliance with the 2016 Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, the "Comply or Explain" provision of the Code has been applied to the OSP. As the OSP is a small non-statutory body that falls under the Justice Vote (Vote 24), it does not have its own Internal Audit Unit or Audit & Risk Committee and it is not required to produce Financial Statements.

Arrangements have been put in place to provide the OSP with access to the Department's Internal Audit and Audit & Risk Committee in relation to financial governance. The Department's Financial Management Unit who report on the OSP's income and spending in their monthly management reports also supports the OSP. The monthly reports are kept under review by the OSP and procedures are in place to ensure that expenditure is authorised in accordance with the Department's guidelines. The OSP complies with tax law obligations.

The OSP has a risk management system in place, including a risk register and reports key risks and management actions being taken to address and, to the extent possible, to mitigate these risks.

The OSP ensures that there is an appropriate focus on good practice in purchasing and that procedures are in place to ensure compliance with all relevant guidelines and procurement policy. Procurement undertaken by the OSP is carried out in consultation with the Department's Procurement Unit.

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**An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt**  
Department of Justice