

Gerald Auer
Public Relations and Event Management
Head

Medical University of Graz
Neue Stiftingtalstraße 6
8010 Graz
gerald.auer@medunigraz.at

Press release
For immediate release

Forensic science in the service of justice
Indispensable interface of medicine, law and science

Graz, 15 September 2025: Whether to solve crimes or protect victims of violence or crisis situations, forensic medicine is often at work in the background at the interface of medicine, law and science—and is indispensable to society.

Current developments in this key discipline are the focus of the 104th annual conference of the German Society of Forensic Medicine, which will take place from 16–19 September 2025 at the Medical University of Graz. Experts from Austria and abroad will discuss the progress in clinical and post-mortem forensic medicine, forensic imaging, forensic molecular biology, forensic toxicology as well as adjacent fields and interdisciplinary areas.

When medicine and law overlap

Forensic scientists' work goes far beyond classic autopsies. They conduct site inspections, reconstruct the order of events, analyze bloodstain patterns, document injuries and appear in court as independent experts. The range of tasks includes chemical and toxicological investigations, expert reports on medical errors or DNA analysis.

Their importance becomes clear in crises in particular: All victims who died in the shootings in Graz were autopsied at the Med Uni Graz Diagnostic and Research Institute of Forensic Medicine. Injuries were documented precisely and the required expert reports were produced, building an indispensable foundation for the authorities' investigation.

Forensic medicine also protects the living

Forensic medicine is not only important for the deceased. The Clinical Forensic Medical Examination Center of Med Uni Graz is a low-threshold point of contact with a separate entrance for individuals affected by physical or sexual violence. They can get help there free of charge—regardless of their age or sex or whether the incident was reported to the police.

"We are an important piece of the puzzle in a diverse landscape of support. Through our actions, we mediate between the criminal legal system, medical practitioners and the forensics team. For an individual affected by violence, it is possible to say before the court: 'This happened. I can prove it,'" explains Sarah Heinze, head of the Diagnostic and Research Institute of Forensic Medicine at Med Uni Graz.

Pioneering Minds - Research and Education for Patients' Health and Well-Being

Medizinische Universität Graz, Neue Stiftingtalstraße 6, 8010 Graz, www.medunigraz.at

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Research that shapes the future

The Diagnostic and Research Institute of Forensic Medicine in Graz combines forensic practice with internationally relevant research. Innovative projects range from telemedicine-supported clinical forensic tests (Forensic PETRA) to the dating of hematomas with MRT to methods for age determination that do not involve radiation exposure. The pilot project "Model Region South" on the topic of violence prevention shows how forensic experts can be embedded in a modern support structure for victims of violence.

The institute not only helps resolve criminal acts but also develops methods that strengthen victim protection and improve the securing of evidence for the courts.

An exciting career with responsibility and future prospects

The conference in Graz should both strengthen international collaboration and make the profession more attractive to young medical practitioners. Despite its great societal relevance, the discipline is suffering from an acute lack of up-and-coming forensic scientists. This choice of a profession comes with great responsibility and scientific variety—and is extremely important if justice is to be served.

Q & A with Sarah Heinze, head of the Med Uni Graz Diagnostic and Research Institute of Forensic Medicine

Why is forensic medicine indispensable to society?

"Our work provides answers to unresolved questions of truth and justice. We clarify the cause of death, document violence, secure evidence and translate medical facts into a language that holds up before the court. Without forensic medicine, there would be significantly less legal certainty for victims, their relations and society as a whole."

Is forensic medicine only about autopsies?

"That is a widespread misconception. We don't just do autopsies, we also do site inspections, crime scene reconstructions and bloodstain pattern analysis; prepare toxicological and molecular biology reports; and conduct clinical examinations of survivors of violence. It's this mix that makes the profession so exciting and relevant."

How does your work differ from TV series like CSI?

"We don't solve any cases on our own. Instead, we are part of a large network with the police, the courts, the medical system and victim protection institutions. What's true: Great attention to detail and sometimes a detective's intuition are necessary. But in real life, it often takes weeks or months before there are any results."

What role does the Clinical Forensic Medical Examination Center play?

"The Clinical Forensic Medical Examination Center is a low-threshold point of contact for anyone who has been a victim of physical or sexual violence. It is a place where injuries can be documented free of charge in a format that can be used in the courts—even if those affected have not decided whether to file a report with the police. This gives them time and room for maneuver. Since the new premises opened in May 2024, we have assisted numerous individuals."

Is there any current research that sets international standards?

"Yes. We are especially proud of our forensic telemedicine projects (Forensic PETRA), which facilitate quick access to forensic expertise for victims of violence in rural regions. We are also working with new methods and combinations of methods in forensic imaging, e.g., within the framework of cruelty to children. These are developments that have an enormous importance in legal proceedings."

How does it look in terms of the next generation of forensic scientists?

"Unfortunately, there has been a significant lack of new forensic scientists in Austria as well as the German-speaking world for years. Our profession is very exciting, important to society and closely networked internationally. We hope that the annual conference in Graz will help get young medical practitioners interested in forensic medicine."

What numbers and facts clearly illustrate the importance of your work?

- Around 380 autopsies performed annually at the institute (responsible for Styria, Carinthia, South Burgenland)
- Growing number of clinical forensic examinations of victims of violence every year (2024: 237)
- 6 research projects with international partners
- Clinical Forensic Medical Examination Center since 2008
- Cooperation with the courts, police, health services and victim protection institutions within the pilot project "Model Region South"
- Numerous professional development programs on clinical forensic and forensic post-mortem topics

Contact

Further information:

Sarah Heinze
University Professor of Forensic Medicine
Medical University of Graz
Diagnostic and Research Institute of Forensic Medicine
Tel.: +43 316 385 73121
sarah.heinze@medunigraz.at
<https://gerichtsmedizin.medunigraz.at/>