In the early 1800s, forensic medicine was not divided into distinct disciplines. Physicians and surgeons who performed autopsies and testified in court depended on a variety of sources for their income and provided expertise as needed. No regular system of payment was provided for expert testimony, laboratory analysis, or postmortem examination. Toxicology and forensic pathology were just emerging as distinct fields, and most autopsies were performed by physicians without any special training.

Today, forensic science includes many disciplines, with dozens of specialties and sub-specialties drawing on expanding scientific knowledge and technological expertise.