As coordinator for the sale of all surplus personal property for King County, I encounter a lot of variety. King County operates a transit system, its own international airport and regional wastewater and solid waste (refuse) systems in addition to the typical administrative functions associated with local government. Yet I had never seen any particular irony in the phrase “variety is the spice of life” until I received a phone message from the King County Medical Examiner’s office.

In recent years, forensic science has become glamorized and is the basis for television shows like CSI and NCIS. The thought of actually seeing the inside workings of the Medical Examiner’s Office was both an exciting prospect and an uneasy curiosity. (In fact, I was fascinated when dissecting frogs in my high school biology class, so I was thinking positively about this adventure.)

When I returned the call, I was informed that the State law (Revised Code of Washington 36.24.130) had been changed, and that all unclaimed personal effects of the Medical Examiner’s “clientele” were now to be disposed of through the county surplus sales process. The Medical Investigator I spoke with emphasized that I would only be dealing with property deemed “valuable.” “Deemed valuable by whom?” I asked. “You,” he said. He then asked if I could meet with them to evaluate the property and complete the transfer to my possession because they had a backlog that covered several years and were anxious to close these cases. We agreed to a date and time.

I hung up the phone and said one word, “Eewwwwwww!”

I was picked up from my office and driven to the Medical Examiner’s Office. I was escorted through two security doors and into a large conference room where boxes filled with manila envelopes were waiting on the table in the center of the room. After being introduced to a second Medical Investigator, I sat down and was offered some latex gloves, along with these words of advice: “You will probably want to wear these.”

In the Medical Examiner’s Office, preserving the chain of custody is paramount.
Regardless of the value of the property. The value is determined first by immediate family. Should the family decide not to claim the property, the task of assigning value falls to me. Descriptors used by the Medical Examiner’s Office are kept to a minimum. For example, a gold wedding band is described as a yellow metal ring. A diamond ring is described as a white or yellow metal ring with a clear stone.

The transfer process was discussed and I learned why there were more than two of us in the room. One Medical Investigator would identify the case in the official logbook while the other would identify the corresponding envelope for that case. He would then open the envelope, pouring the contents onto the table, where I would examine the items and determine if they had enough value for an auction. Those items with value, I would sign for. If I determined there was no value to an item, the three of us would initial the logbook indicating that the property was to be destroyed.

I was told that any currency had already been turned over to the county treasury and that I would, for the most part, be looking at jewelry. The first item was a wristwatch with what appeared to be crimson paint speckled on the band. After realizing that this was dried blood, I declared that unless other watches were Rolexes, they would be rejected. The officer with the logbook announced the contents of the next envelope: an earring. Out of the envelope slid a small plastic Ziploc bag containing a circular metal band with two balls at the ends. I picked it up trying to figure out how this stayed in one’s ear, and then realized it was a piercing ring. No thanks.

Necklaces and wedding bands were signed for and set aside for sale. When the Medical Investigator said, “naval ring,” I thought, “Oh, maybe a Coast Guard ring with a big stone.” There in the Ziploc was a ring identical to the earring. I looked up in puzzlement and he deadpanned, “It’s where they find the ring.” Oh.

We agreed that all future piercing rings would be discarded, frankly because I didn’t want to find out what other places they found these things.

At the end of the day, the Medical Investigator with the logbook said, “I have saved this case for last.” He then reached into the box and extracted a sword wrapped in a cardboard sheath. “This” he proclaimed, “is a Saxon (German) artillery short sword from the 1850s.” It was clear he had done some research, yet when I asked if he knew its value, he replied with a grin, “I don’t know, – that’s your job.”

I’ve sold some unusual items in the course of my work but this would be my first sword.

After two full days, we had processed all the cases. As we proceeded to the more recent cases, I was encouraged to see that they had computerized their tracking system. The series of checks and balances was as diligent as before, with the absence of the opportunity for human error with a handwritten logbook.

During my visit to the Medical Examiner’s Office, I experienced a broad range of emotions. My reactions emerged from initial shock and eventually leveled out to respect and admiration for the detached professionalism displayed by these two Medical Investigators. I was humbled by the way they comported themselves with the utmost respect for those whose last belongings were finally being disposed. Upon reflection, with an enlightened view of property, I am convinced that variety IS the spice of life!

Russ Johnson is the Personal Property Manager in the Fleet Administration Division. He has more than 20 years experience with inventory control at King County and is the current Western Region Director of Membership for the National Property Management Association.