

**Opaque legislation** - *In our view*

When Gov. Tom Corbett ran for governor, he promised greater transparency. Apparently fellow Republicans in the Legislature didn't get the memo.

Last week, the state Senate added Senate Bill 961 to a list of bills it voted out of committee this week.

S.B. 961 would eliminate access to all autopsy records and would restrict access even to name, cause and manner of death in accidents until 30 days after the end of the year.

Current law requires coroners to provide official records and papers for the preceding year to the prothonotary, who has a duty to make those records available to the public. The proposed change would eliminate the requirement for public access.

That means that under this bill, coroners would not be obligated to give cause of death to even the families of the deceased, much less to the media or to the public.

Coroners have sought to keep information about suspicious deaths quiet to protect family members. But coroners are elected officials, not grief counselors. They are sworn to carry out their duties impartially.

They have the power to hold an inquest to determine cause of death. They issue death certificates and maintain death records. Under S.B. 961, these records would be sealed.

Similar legislation was vetoed by Gov. Ed Rendell, who noted that the "public has a right to the records produced with their taxpayer dollars."

Indeed, the public has a right to know if someone involved in a fatal accident was driving under the influence or had become stricken while driving.

If a worker dies on the job, the public has a right to know if the worker's behavior contributed to the cause of death or if the employer was at fault.

Restricting access not only ill-serves the public, it denies access to death records by family members who may dispute a coroner's report.

And coroner's records also may be used to free the innocent. The Harrisburg Patriot-News used access to coroner records several years ago to expose the improper convictions of four people accused in a death.

S.B. 961 would throw a veil of secrecy over deaths in the commonwealth.

The English Coroner System, upon which the state's system is based, has been in existence for more than 600 years. It has worked well.

It provides the kind of transparency necessary in a democracy.