

Autopsy

Aiding the Living By Understanding Death

When a person dies, the family is bereaved, often confused, and perhaps angry. One way of helping the family understand what has happened to their loved one is by performing an autopsy. The autopsy has the additional value of increasing medical knowledge, thus benefiting families and humanity.

What is an autopsy?

A complete autopsy is an external and internal examination of the body after death using surgical techniques. The examination is performed by a pathologist, a medical doctor who is specially trained in this type of procedure and who is able to recognize the effects of disease on the body. The procedure takes about two to four hours to perform. This examination may be comprehensive or may be limited to a particular organ system. For example, in the case of a suspected heart attack, some physicians and families request that the autopsy be limited to examination of the chest. However, limiting the scope of the autopsy may reduce its value.

The autopsy room is regarded as a special place for gathering medical knowledge. The body is treated with dignity and respect, and the wishes of the family are maintained at all times. Small samples of each organ are taken for microscopic examination to look for disease such as malignancy or infection. Other tests that may be performed include studying genes and checking for drugs, chemicals, or toxic substances. When the examination is completed, a written report is issued. The final report takes several weeks to prepare due to the detailed studies that may be performed. The report becomes a permanent part of the patient's medical record.

The findings may be discussed with the family physician or with the pathologist.

Why perform an autopsy?

The primary purpose of an autopsy is to answer any questions the family or physician may have about the illness, cause of death, and/or any co-existing conditions. Establishing a cause of death can be a source of comfort to families. The autopsy may also determine whether there are inheritable problems and help other family members through early diagnosis and treatment. Furthermore, what is learned through an autopsy on one patient may help save the lives of others with similar conditions.

Who requests an autopsy?

In some cases, the law may mandate that an autopsy be performed. In all other cases, permission is required. Permission to perform the autopsy can be requested either by the patient's physician or by the family. In some cases, the patient may have indicated their wish for an autopsy in discussions with the family or by signing a personal directive for autopsy. *The autopsy cannot be performed without consent of the legally designated responsible party, usually the next of kin.* When giving consent, the family may make any restrictions, limitations, or special requests.

How families benefit from the autopsy

- ▲ Discovering inherited or familial diseases may help families through early diagnosis and treatment, and in family planning.
- ▲ Discovering an infectious disease, for example tuberculosis, may lead to early diagnosis and treatment to help other family members and close contacts.
- ▲ Uncovering evidence of a work-related disease might lead to compensation for the family.
- ▲ Providing crucial information for the settling of insurance claims or death benefits may result in benefits for the family.

- ▲ Confirming a specific cause of death may simply ease the stress of the unknown.
- ▲ Finding that diagnosis and treatment was appropriate may be comforting to the family.
- ▲ Knowledge that information gained by the autopsy may help someone else to live longer may ease the profound sense of loss experienced by families.

How communities benefit from autopsies

Autopsies benefit communities by:

- ▲ Increasing knowledge about causes and course of an illness and effects of different types of treatment.
- ▲ Disclosing evidence of environmental hazards.
- ▲ Explaining the causes of injuries and accidents involving automobiles, falls, or other situations.
- ▲ Helping to establish the cause and manner of death, which at times may be required by law.

Common concerns about autopsies

Is there a charge for the autopsy?

The autopsy is important to providing an understanding of the quality of patient care. It is also one of the most expensive procedures performed in many hospitals. A number of hospitals, particularly teaching hospitals, do not charge for autopsies on patients who died within the hospital. However, there are institutions that do find it necessary to charge for this service because of the labor, expertise, and cost involved. In some cases, there is a charge for transportation of the body to and from an autopsy facility.

Will the autopsy affect funeral arrangements?

The performance of an autopsy should not delay a funeral or affect viewing of the body. Funeral directors and pathologists have been working together for many years so that the final arrangements for the body can be made.

Does the pathologist retain any organs?

The pathologist may retain some organs for more detailed examination, research, or educational purposes. The length of time organs may be retained is variable and related to the purpose

of the retention. Retained organs are disposed of in accordance with hospital policy. Families may require that organs be released to the funeral home with the body by giving specific instructions in the written autopsy consent form. However, doing so may limit the value of the autopsy and is not recommended.

Are there religious conflicts?

People may worry that performance of an autopsy may conflict with religious beliefs. Religious decisions are always personal. Families may want to discuss the decision to have an autopsy performed with other family members and religious or spiritual advisors.

Questions?

Additional questions about the autopsy or organ and tissue donation can be directed to your physician, nurse, or chaplain. They can arrange for you to speak with the appropriate contact person in the pathology department.

We hope this brochure has been helpful in answering some of the questions you may have about the autopsy. This procedure has been known throughout history as a way of helping the family understand what has happened to their loved one. It is a means of increasing medical knowledge, which in turn benefits you, your family, and the community at large.

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