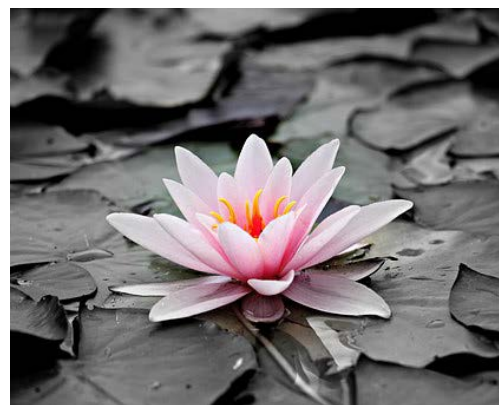


## **The Autopsy**

### *An important study after a death*

*We are deeply sorry for your loss. We know that it may be hard to read this handout right now. But, we want to explain what an autopsy is and why it is important.*

*This handout covers what is done in an autopsy, how long it takes, and the how to get the results. It also explains why forms need to be filled out and who pays, if there are charges.*



*We are deeply sorry for your loss.*

### **What is an autopsy?**

An autopsy is a physical exam to find out the cause of death. It is also called a *post-mortem exam*. During the exam, a doctor checks both inside and the outside of the body. The doctor may:

- Take tissue samples and look at them with a microscope
- Take cultures to check for infections
- Do other studies to diagnose certain types of disease

### **Who does the autopsy?**

An autopsy is done by a *pathologist*, a doctor with special training in diagnosing disease. At University of Washington Medical Center (UWMC), our pathologists have special training in doing autopsies to find the cause of death and diagnose diseases.

Autopsy and After Death Services is part of the care team at UWMC. We treat the deceased person's body with respect and dignity at all times.

### **Why is an autopsy important?**

The autopsy exam is important to families and loved ones, healthcare providers, and society.

Sometimes, this exam is the only way to find the true cause of death. Or, if we know what caused the death, a full autopsy may be the only way to know the extent of the condition. When we find out more about the disease, we may learn why certain problems occurred during treatment.

Some diseases found during an autopsy may be inherited (*genetic*). Knowing if the patient's disease was genetic can help family members prepare for their own health needs. It helps family members and their providers decide about medical tests, genetic screening, or diagnostic procedures.

An autopsy may also help doctors better understand the effects of any treatment that the patient received. The information gained from an autopsy may help guide treatment for others and in medical research.

Benefits to society include the discovery and description of new disease processes. Society also benefits when the cause of death on the death certificate is accurate. This improves the quality of the information that is used in planning healthcare services and disease prevention efforts.

An autopsy can be very helpful in finding the cause of death or underlying diseases. But sometimes, even a full autopsy may not answer all the questions that families or doctors may have.

### **What is examined in an autopsy?**

Most times, all organs, including the brain, are examined. Diseases often affect more than one part of the body. A correct diagnosis may depend on the findings in all organs of the body. This is done even if there were no signs or symptoms related to a certain organ.

Families may choose to limit the autopsy to certain parts of the body. Talk with the patient's doctor about your wishes. The autopsy consent form will include any limits you request.

### **Will there be marks on the body?**

Families are often concerned that their loved one's body will not be suitable for viewing after autopsy. The autopsy incisions will not be seen when the deceased person is dressed. Their hands and face will not have any marks. With the help of funeral home staff, there can be a full viewing before and during memorial services, and at the time of burial.

### **How long does an autopsy take?**

An autopsy takes about 4 hours. The deceased person's body can then be transported from the hospital.

Autopsies are done weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Rarely, an autopsy may be done after hours or on weekends, if needed for medical or family reasons.

## **When will we know the results?**

A first report is sent to the deceased patient's doctors within 3 days. If more studies are needed, it can take 4 to 10 weeks to get the results. Some studies take even longer, depending on issues related to the disease or death.

Most times, a final written report is ready in 12 weeks. It is placed in the deceased patient's medical chart and a copy is sent to their UWMC doctors.

If you wish, you may:

- Ask your loved one's doctor to send you a copy of the report.
- Talk with your loved one's doctor about the report.
- Send a written request to UWMC Patient Data Services (Medical Records) to get a copy of the report. Send your request to:

UW Medical Center  
Medical Records  
Box 359738  
325 Ninth Ave.  
Seattle, WA 98104

- You or your loved one's doctor may call the pathologist at UWMC to talk about the autopsy findings. Or, you can set up a meeting to better understand the findings. To do this, call UWMC Autopsy and After Death Services at 206.598.4205.

## **What forms need to be filled out?**

When a patient dies, we need to make sure to fully document everything that is done for the family, healthcare providers, hospital, and society. Family members and healthcare workers will need to sign several forms. While it may seem insensitive to ask you to sign forms soon after your loved one's death, these forms are needed to protect the family's interests.

### **Autopsies at UWMC**

The *Autopsy Consent Form* gives us permission to do the autopsy at UWMC. Washington state law decides which persons must give consent for autopsy, and tells the order in which they must be asked for consent.

This ordered list is on the back of the Autopsy Consent Form and must be strictly followed. If the person who is required by law to give consent does not give consent, the autopsy cannot be done.

Consent for autopsy may be given by one of two forms:

- A witnessed *signed* consent, or
- A witnessed *telephone* consent.

We know that it is a very sad time when we ask for permission to do an autopsy. You may find it helpful to talk about the autopsy with the doctors, a religious advisor, a social worker, or the pathologist who will be doing the exam. It may also help to carefully read the consent form.

### **Autopsies at the King County Medical Examiner's Office**

Sometimes, the legal system becomes involved after the death of a patient. When this occurs, the King County Medical Examiner's Office has the legal authority to do an autopsy. They do not need to get the family's consent, but the Medical Examiner's Office will contact the family and explain the situation to them. The family will be able to talk with the pathologists there about the autopsy.

### **Who pays for the autopsy?**

If the patient died at UWMC, there is no extra fee for an autopsy. We also cover autopsy costs for anyone who was under the direct care or consultation of a provider from UWMC or UWPN (UW Physician's Network), if this provider asks for an autopsy.

If the patient dies somewhere other than at UWMC, the family must pay for transport to UWMC for autopsy.

If the patient was not under the direct care or consultation of a UWMC or UWPN provider, a pathologist from UWMC Anatomic Pathology must approve the autopsy. The family or the medical facility that requests the autopsy then pays for the exam.

### **Questions?**

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Autopsy and After Death Services:  
8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.  
206.598.4205