



When a Loved One Dies in the Hospital

Answers to common questions

We are very sorry for your loss. We know that this handout may be hard to read right now.

This handout answers many of the questions you may have at this time. It also gives phone numbers you may need and website resources.

Families and friends of a patient who has died in the hospital have questions. They want to know what happens after the death, what hospital staff and family members need to do, and how to find the resources they need.



We are very sorry for your loss.

We hope this handout answers some of these questions. You may also find these phone numbers helpful:

University of Washington Medical Center (UWMC)

Admitting..... 206.598.4310

Please call us with the name of the funeral home or cremation facility you will be using.

Autopsy and After Death Services/Anatomic Pathology...206.598.4205

Please call us with questions about disposition, autopsy, and other issues.

Social Work and Care Coordination..... 206.598.4370

Spiritual Care & Wellbeing 206.598.9174

Main UWMC number..... 206.598.3300

Harborview Medical Center (HMC)

Admitting/Nursing Administrative Supervisor..... 206.744.3085

Autopsy and After Death Services/Anatomic Pathology...206.744.3078

Please call us with the name of the funeral home or cremation facility you will be using. You can also ask us questions about disposition, autopsy, and other issues.



A social worker can listen and talk with you about some of the things that will need to be done and decisions that will need to be made.

If you would like to meet with a social worker, please talk with the nursing staff or call the Social Work department for your medical center (see phone numbers on page 1).

Social Work.....	206.744.8030
Spiritual Care.....	206.744.3155
Main HMC number.....	206.744.3000

University of Washington School of Medicine

Willed Body Program..... 206.543.1860
<http://wbp.biostr.washington.edu>

UW BRaIN Laboratory.....uwnp@uw.edu | 206.897.6566
<https://dlmp.uw.edu/research-labs/keene/braindonation>

Community Resources

King County Medical Examiner (KCME) 206.731.3232
www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/examiner.aspx

King County Vital Statistics/Death Certificates206.897.5100
<https://kingcounty.gov/depts/records-licensing/archives/research-guides/vital.aspx>

Organ, Tissue, and Cornea Donation Agencies

General information on donation.....	www.donatelifetoday.com
LifeCenter Northwest.....	877.275.5269
LifeNet Health Northwest.....	800.847.7831
SightLife 24-Hour Donor Coordinator.....	800.214.6356
UW BRaIN Laboratory.....	uwnp@uw.edu 206.897.6566

How do we find out the cause of the death? Can we ask for details about the time before the death?

It can be helpful to know the cause of a loved one’s death and what led up to the death. We encourage you to talk about this with the doctor who managed your loved one's care. The doctor can answer questions about the dying process and what may have caused the death.

As soon as you can, please tell your nurse that you would like to speak with the doctor. If the doctor is not at the hospital at the moment, your nurse can tell you how to reach them.

Another way to find out the cause of death is to have an autopsy done. Please see pages 5 and 6 to learn more about autopsies.

When a loved one dies, what does their family need to do?

Hospital staff will talk with the family of the deceased about:

- Working with donation agencies to find out if their loved one can be an organ, tissue, or cornea donor

- Having an autopsy done
- Working with the funeral home to fill out the death certificate

Family members or the legal representative of the deceased will decide:

- If they want an autopsy to be done. This can be several days after the death, but the autopsy must be done before a funeral, burial, or cremation. There may be scheduling issues to think about. Note that an autopsy is sometimes required by law (see page 5).
- Where their loved one's body will go for a funeral, burial, or cremation. This decision can be made several days after death.

Some of the legal tasks that must be done after a death are explained in the handouts in your Bereavement Packet. The handouts "After a Death" and "Planning a Funeral" explain what needs to be done about Social Security and veteran's benefits, life insurance, wills, and bank accounts. "Planning a Funeral" also includes basic information about choosing a funeral or cremation service.

What do we do about burial or cremation?

There are many funeral homes and cremation facilities in the Seattle area. Some people choose a funeral home or cremation facility based on its location or advice from family or friends.

The hospital does not provide funeral, burial, or cremation services. We also do not give advice about other facilities or their services.

After you have decided about funeral, burial, or cremation, please call us with the name of the funeral home or cremation facility:

- **For UWMC patients:**
 - Call Admitting at 206.598.4310 or After Death Services at 206.598.4205.
 - The funeral home or cremation facility staff will also call UWMC Admitting or After Death Services to arrange to move the body.
 - UWMC Social Work and Care Coordination or After Death Services can help you with special issues, such as moving the body out of the state or country, or finding a direct cremation service.
- **For HMC patients:**
 - Call After Death Services at 206.744.3078.
 - The funeral home or cremation facility staff will also call HMC After Death Services to arrange to move the body.

- HMC Social Work or After Death Services can help you with special issues, such as moving the body out of the state or country, or finding a direct cremation service.

What is direct cremation?

Direct cremation means that the body is not *embalmed* (preserved) or prepared in any way before it is cremated. A funeral or memorial service can still be held. To learn more about direct cremation, search for “Cremation Services” on the internet.

What if we cannot afford a funeral home?

If money is a concern, ask to talk with a social worker for ideas on lower-cost funerals.

What if we want to donate our loved one’s body to science?

Donating a body for scientific purposes can be done **only** under certain conditions. The Willed Body Program at the Department of Biological Structure (Anatomy) at the University of Washington will accept **some** bodies for donation.

To see if the program will accept their loved one’s body for donation, families must call 206.543.1860 weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Because the donation needs to happen quickly, families should call the Willed Body Program as soon as they can after the death occurs.

If the donation is not accepted, the family will need to make other arrangements for taking care of their loved one’s body. The Willed Body Program does not provide autopsy services.

You can apply to become a body donor before death occurs. To learn more, visit <http://wbp.biostr.washington.edu>.

Another way to contribute to science is to give our Anatomic Pathology department permission to do an autopsy. Autopsies help provide training for attending doctors, medical students, residents in clinical medicine and pathology, and other healthcare providers and students.

What if we want to donate our loved one’s brain tissue?

Many people know about the life-saving impact of organ donation, but less people know how helpful brain tissue donations are. Brain tissue donations from individuals with and without a history of brain disease are both important for medical research. Donations help researchers learn about differences between the normal brain and those affected by *neurodegeneration* (the loss of specific cells in the brain) or a

traumatic brain injury.

The Biorepository and Integrated Neuropathology (BRaIN) Laboratory in the Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology collects brain tissues for medical researchers. These researchers study how the brain functions. Families will receive a report about the findings from their loved one's brain.

Families may arrange with the BRaIN lab to donate their loved one's brain tissue and with the Willd Body Program to donate the rest of the body. To learn more, visit <https://dlmp.uw.edu/research-labs/keene/braindonation>.

Will someone talk with us about organ and tissue donation?

UW Medicine facilities work with local donation agencies. These agencies include LifeCenter Northwest, LifeNet Health Northwest, and SightLife. We tell these agencies about all deaths that occur in the hospital.

Many issues are considered in deciding if someone can be an organ, tissue, or cornea donor. If the patient can be:

- A tissue or cornea donor, we will talk with their legal next of kin about donation. We will contact this person within a few hours after the death.
- An organ donor, we must talk with their legal next of kin about donation **before** breathing support is stopped.

If the patient is already a registered donor, we will tell this to the family when we talk about donation.

To learn more about donation, family members may call one of the agencies listed under "Organ, Tissue, and Cornea Donation Agencies" on page 2 of this handout.

What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is a medical procedure that is sometimes done after death. It can help find the cause of death. It can also help diagnose the disease that caused the patient's symptoms. An autopsy is done by a doctor with special training in *pathology* (the study of disease).

We offer to have an autopsy done whenever a patient dies. There is no charge to the family for the procedure. We believe that an autopsy can help the family understand their loved one's death and disease. The autopsy results can also help educate healthcare providers, and help improve medical treatment and diagnoses for other patients.

For an autopsy to be done, we must receive consent from the person authorized by Washington state law to give consent for an autopsy. That person must fill out the “UW Medicine Consent/Authorization for Autopsy” form, and their signature must be witnessed. This form has a list of everyone who is authorized to give consent for an autopsy under Washington state law, in order of priority. The consent/authorization may also be given over the phone.

A handout called “The Autopsy” explains more about the procedure. It is in your Bereavement Packet. To learn more, you can also call Autopsy and After Death Services (see phone numbers on page 1).

Is an autopsy ever done when it is not requested?

An autopsy is never done at a UW Medicine facility unless permission is given by the person authorized by Washington state law to give consent for autopsy.

An autopsy may be required by law because of the type of death or details about the death. This includes deaths from drug overdoses, injuries, and accidents.

The law requires us to report these types of death to the King County Medical Examiner’s Office (KCME). If the Medical Examiner becomes involved, an autopsy may be done at the office of the KCME.

If KCME pathologists decide that an autopsy must be done, the law allows them to do so. They do not need to get permission from the family. But, the KCME will try to contact the family to talk about the need for the autopsy.

There is no charge for a KCME autopsy. You can call the KCME Office at 206.731.3232.

May the family or loved ones ask for an autopsy?

Yes. Most times, we ask the family of a patient who has died for permission to do an autopsy. If you have not been asked, family members may request that an autopsy be done.

For an autopsy to be done, the person who is authorized by Washington state law to give consent **must** authorize the autopsy. We will not do an autopsy if this person does not give consent, or if we cannot find this person.

If this person gives consent, they can specify what parts of the body may be examined. This person may want to talk with the attending doctor or *pathologist* (a doctor who studies diseases and their causes) when making that decision.

How long will the body stay in the patient's hospital room?

We know that you may want time with your loved one after death. The body will need to be moved from the patient room a few hours after the death. Nursing staff will talk with you about this.

Where does the body go once it leaves the patient's hospital room?

Bodies are taken to a secure, refrigerated area in the hospital, called the *morgue*. Bodies can be kept in the morgue for several days, until the family has chosen a funeral home or agency for burial or cremation. After the family makes this choice, staff from the funeral home or agency will arrange to move the body.

May we take photos of our loved one?

Yes, you may take photos in the deceased's hospital room. Please talk with your nurse or social worker if you wish to take photos in the hospital. They can help you with this.

You may also choose to take photos after your loved one's body has been prepared by the funeral home.

Family is coming from out of town who want to view the body. Can they view the body at the hospital?

A few hours after the death, the body will be moved from the patient room to the hospital morgue. It is possible to view the body in the morgue, but this must be arranged ahead of time:

- **For UWMC patients:** Call After Death Services at 206.598.4205, or Social Work and Care Coordination at 206.598.4370.
- **For HMC patients:** Call the Nursing Administrative Supervisor at 206.744.3085, or After Death Services at 206.744.3078.

Most times, viewing of the body in the hospital morgue can be scheduled only during regular work hours. Many families choose to have this viewing done at the funeral home they have chosen.

What happens to our loved one's belongings?

If family members are present when the death occurs, we ask them to take all the patient's belongings with them. If any items are left behind, we will label them with the patient's name and send them to Admitting. The family may pick up the belongings there. They can also

give their funeral director permission to pick up the belongings when funeral home staff come to the hospital to move the body.

Who fills out the death certificate?

Hospital staff will fill out the “Cause of Death” section on the death certificate. Staff from the funeral home or burial or cremation service will talk with the family to complete the “Personal Data” section of the death certificate. The death certificate cannot be filed or certified without this information.

How do we get copies of the death certificate?

You can get certified copies of the death certificate from the funeral director you are working with. You can also buy copies from the King County Vital Statistics Department. Call 206.897.5100 or visit their website at www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/vitalstats.aspx.

Are there other resources that will be helpful?

We have more handouts that may be helpful to families after a death occurs. Some of these are included in your Bereavement Packet.

You can also find these handouts online at

<https://healthonline.washington.edu>. Use the search word “grief”:

- “After a Death: A guide for the days and weeks ahead”
- “Bereavement Support Services: Resources, support groups, and books”
- “A Guide Through Grief: Mourning the loss of a loved one”

Questions?

If you have questions about choosing a funeral home, cremation services, autopsy, death certificates, or other related issues, call the After Death Services for your medical center:

For UWMC patients: Call 206.598.4205 and ask to speak with a staff member or doctor in Anatomic Pathology.

For HMC patients: Call 206.744.3078.