

When a person dies, the family is grieving and may have many questions. One way to help the family understand what has happened to their loved one is to perform an autopsy.

WHAT IS AN AUTOPSY?

The autopsy is a complex examination where a specialist doctor called a pathologist reviews medical information, performs a complex examination and formulates a report to answer medical questions. An autopsy is done as soon as possible after death and takes about two to four hours to perform. The autopsy may be done on the entire body, which is a complete autopsy, or it may be limited to one area of the body.

In a complete autopsy, samples of most organs are taken and are examined under a microscope to look for diseases such as cancer or infection. Other diseases that run in families can also sometimes be diagnosed.

In a limited autopsy, the pathologist may only examine the organs specified at the time of consent. This may answer certain specific questions, but may limit the identification of other diseases that might answer clinical questions or be of interest for family history.

The autopsy room is a special place for gathering medical knowledge, where a body is treated with dignity, and the wishes of the family are respected.

When the examination is complete, a written report is done. The final report takes about one to three months to prepare due to the detailed studies that may be done. The report is sent to the physician who signed the Consent for Autopsy form. A copy will also be submitted to the patient's permanent health care record and is accessible to other physicians on Netcare.

CONSENT FOR AUTOPSY

In some cases, the law requires that an autopsy be performed. When an autopsy is not required by law, consent must be obtained from the legally authorized representative of the deceased. This is usually the next of kin. The order of legally authorized representatives is listed on the Consent for Autopsy form.

When giving consent, the family:

- Should consider the expressed wishes of the deceased
- Can make special requests or limit the autopsy

If you change your mind before the autopsy has taken place, you can change or withdraw your consent.

WHY PERFORM AN AUTOPSY?

The main purpose of an autopsy is to answer questions the family or doctor(s) may have about the illness, the effects of treatment, cause of death and/or other medical conditions. Knowing the cause of death can be a source of comfort to families. The information learned through an autopsy increases medical knowledge and may help others with similar conditions. Here are some examples of the benefits of autopsy:

- Finding an infectious disease like tuberculosis may lead to early diagnosis and treatment to help other family members and close contacts.
- Discovering inherited or diseases that run in families may help families through early diagnosis, treatment and in family planning.

- Finding proof of a work-related disease might lead to compensation for the family.
- Supplying crucial information for the settling of insurance claims or death benefits.
- Increasing knowledge about the effects of new medical and surgical treatments, to support ongoing improvements for clinical care.

COMMON QUESTIONS

Is there a charge for the autopsy?

The laboratory will not charge for the autopsy or any related testing, however, there may be costs related to transportation between facilities depending on the funeral home/body transport service. This is best discussed with the funeral home to ensure the correct information is given related to your particular situation.

Non-Canadian decedents may have additional costs for the autopsy and related testing that may or may not be covered by health insurance plans they have.

This is best determined on an individual basis in consultation with any health insurance policy providers that individual may have.

How do I get the results of the autopsy?

The autopsy report is sent to the physician that requested the autopsy. Family can request that a copy also be sent to the family physician who can discuss the autopsy findings with them.

Will the autopsy affect funeral arrangements?

No, an autopsy should not delay a funeral or affect viewing of the body. Funeral directors and pathologists work together closely so that the final arrangements can be made.

Are there religious conflicts?

Some people worry that performing an autopsy may conflict with religious beliefs. Religious decisions are always personal. You may want to talk to other family members and religious or spiritual advisors.

Does the laboratory keep any organs?

The laboratory will keep a sample of the organs examined for diagnostic purposes. Once the autopsy report has been completed, these samples are disposed of following strict hospital standards. The microscope slides and the small samples used to create the microscope slides are stored in secure storage in accordance with laboratory accreditation standard. This means these samples are available for further diagnostic testing or review in the future, if necessary.

Sometimes the laboratory may also need to keep an entire organ for more detailed examination. Most frequently, this is the heart and/or the brain. Again, once the diagnostic tests have been completed, these organs are disposed of following strict hospital standards. Families can request to have the organs released to the funeral home by giving specific instructions on the Consent for Autopsy form.

Will the autopsy be used for teaching?

Yes. The autopsy has an important role in the teaching of medical and nursing students and the training of pathologists and laboratory staff. Trainees are closely supervised and patient confidentiality is maintained.

Samples and materials obtained at autopsy may only be retained for future education purposes if consent is obtained.

Will the autopsy tissues be used for research?

Families may also consent to the donation of organs and/or tissues for long-term teaching and for research. These requests can be made on the Consent for Autopsy form. All research projects are carefully reviewed by the local ethics committee, and all identifying information is removed from research material.

Other questions?

If you have more questions about autopsy, please talk to the doctor. They can arrange for you to speak with someone in the Pathology Department.

If you would like more information or you have questions about organ and/or tissue donation, the doctor can direct you to an appropriate organ and tissue donation program.

We hope this brochure has answered some of your questions about autopsies.

Alberta Precision Laboratories acknowledges the College of American Pathologists and their publication *Autopsy: Aiding the Living by Understanding Death* used as a sample in the development of this brochure.

AUTOPSY INFORMATION

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Alberta Precision Laboratories
www.albertaprecisionlabs.ca
