

Consent

In Australia, post mortem examinations fall into two groups--coronial and non-coronial,

- A coronial post mortem occurs when someone dies suddenly of an unknown cause, within 72 hours of an invasive procedure, such as an operation, or due to an unnatural or unusual cause. Because the post mortem is a legal requirement in these circumstances, it can be undertaken without your consent. In Canberra these Coroner's post mortems are usually performed within three days of death. For more information about coronial post mortems please contact the Coroner's office.
- A non-Coronial post mortem occurs when a health professional caring for your relative has asked for a post mortem to try and obtain further information regarding the death of your relative. Your consent is required for this examination. Consent should be given in writing, although legal consent may be given over the phone to your doctor.

Thinking about whether to consent to a post mortem is a difficult issue. It is important that you discuss the examination with the doctor who has been caring for your relative. You might also want to seek advice from a social worker, religious leader, other family members or your local GP. It is important that you feel you have enough information before making a decision about whether to agree to a post mortem examination.

Post mortem report

A preliminary report, outlining the initial findings, will be available within one week and a full report in 6 to 12 weeks. The timing of the final results will depend on the various tests requested by the pathologist.

A completed post mortem report will be sent to the specialist and general practitioner who cared for your relative. You can contact either of them to get information on the post mortem report.

Contact Numbers

Doctor
Phone

Social worker
Phone

Chaplain
Phone

Acknowledgment: Some of the information in this document was sourced from material written by Dr Susan Arbuckle, Department of Pathology, at the Children's Hospital at Westmead, NSW, Australia.

Information for next of kin and families

What is a post mortem?

A post mortem, also known as an autopsy, is an examination by a doctor, usually a pathologist, of a body after death.

Pathologists are doctors who specialise in the study of disease.

Why is a post mortem examination important?

A full post mortem:

will help you obtain more information about medical conditions that may have caused death; may provide information that will help confirm or rule out a particular condition - this information may be important for you or other family members, particularly if the condition is likely to be inherited; may help those that cared for your relative and provide information that may be used to help other people in the future.

A post mortem may leave some questions unanswered and does not always find the cause of death. Although this can be distressing, it can reassure you that a treatable illness did not cause the death.

What happens during a post mortem?

There are two types of post mortems, a limited post mortem and a full post mortem.

A full post mortem includes a careful external examination as well as an examination of internal organs. X-rays and photographs may also be taken to assist with diagnosis.

A full post mortem is a surgical procedure, somewhat like an operation. The pathologist will usually make two incisions, one down the front of the body and another across the back of the head. This allows the pathologist to examine all the major organs and look for any diseases affecting those organs. Samples of tissues and fluids will usually be taken for microscopic examination, other tests that identify infections, or in special cases for genetic testing.

To get the most information about an organ, it is sometimes necessary to retain it for further examination. The organs most likely to be kept are the heart (when there is a complicated problem) and the brain. Your doctor will discuss the reasons with you and provide you with several choices including:

- not giving your consent;
- consenting to the temporary removal of the organ and making arrangements for it to be returned for burial or cremation after further testing. In some cases, a short delay in the funeral arrangements may be enough to have the organ returned before burial;
- consenting for the organ to be disposed of by the hospital after testing is complete.
- consenting for the hospital to retain the organ indefinitely for scientific purposes such as teaching.

A limited post mortem also provides some answers although it may not fully explain the reasons for your relative's death. A limited post mortem may involve an external examination only, an external examination and some tissue samples or, an external examination with an internal examination, limited to one particular area.

After either a full or limited post mortem, any incisions will be carefully closed and you and your family can then see your relative again if you wish.

The appearance and colour of your relative's skin will change naturally after death. This will happen whether a post mortem occurs or not. Due to the temperature at which the body is kept after death, your relative may also feel different to hold. Embalming of your relative's body can still be carried out after an autopsy.

When will a post mortem be done?

A post mortem will be carried out as soon as possible after consent has been given - usually 24 to 72 hours after death.

If you wish to see your relative prior to the post mortem, this can be arranged through the social worker. The post mortem can be delayed for a short period, but is best done within 48 hours.

Occasionally, where a particular condition is suspected, samples may need to be taken a few hours after death to ensure appropriate tests can be completed. If this is the case, your doctor will discuss this with you.