

Bereavement Care Service

Post mortem examination – information for relatives

Introduction

This leaflet will help you to decide whether to agree to a post mortem examination of your relative. Relatives usually find it helpful to know as much as possible about why their relative died and it is your right to have the information a full post mortem can give. A post mortem can only be undertaken with your permission (unless ordered by the Coroner). It is important for you to know as much as possible about what happens at a post mortem, the results you can expect and the choices you have. You can talk to a doctor, nurse or health visitor about this. You may then like the time to talk with your partner, other members of your family, close friends or religious leader.

If you decide that you do not want a full post mortem, you can consider more limited tests which can still provide valuable information. It is also possible to only undertake an external examination of your relative, however, this is of limited value. It involves an external physical examination, and the taking of an X-ray and / or photograph by a pathologist.

It can be hard to think about a post mortem so soon after death and you may have to make your decision quite quickly. It is important that you have all the information and support you need to reach the decision which is right for you and your relative. We hope this leaflet will help you.

The best patient care depends on learning as much as we can from the care of others. It may be possible to improve care in the future by comparing the findings from the various tests carried out in life with the actual findings after death. We know from other studies that in as many as four cases out of ten, completely unexpected conditions are discovered at full post mortem examination.

We would therefore be grateful for your consent to a post mortem examination so that we may learn more about the underlying disease process that caused death together with any other associated conditions that were present.

What is a post mortem examination?

A post mortem examination is the final step in the investigation of your relative's illness. It is a careful internal examination of the person who has just died and can give valuable information about an illness and its effects on the body. It may tell us more precisely why your relative died. However, even the most detailed post mortem investigation will often leave some questions unanswered and does not always find a cause of death.

Post mortem examinations are carried out by a pathologist, who is a doctor specialising in the laboratory study of disease and of diseased tissue, assisted by a technician who is a person with specialist training to assist pathologists. They are carried out in special facilities provided in the Hospital mortuary. The body will be moved respectfully from the place of death to where the examination is to be carried out.

Why do a post mortem examination?

Post mortem examinations help the medical profession by providing information about illness and health that would not be discovered any other way. Much of what we know about illness today came from such examinations. They help to:

- Identify the cause of death
- Confirm the nature of the illness and/or the extent of the disease
- Identify other conditions that may not have been diagnosed
- Assess the effects of treatments and drugs, and identify any complications or side-effects.

A post mortem examination can help people understand why a loved one died. Sometimes families or partners ask questions that can only be answered with information from a post mortem examination. It is also possible that the information gained may benefit future children in the family, or other patients who suffer similar problems.

Donating organs for transplantation is handled separately from the post mortem procedure. Please ask if you want to know more.

What happens in the post mortem?

The pathologist begins the post mortem with a careful external examination. The body will then be opened and examined internally in detail. The organs are removed from the body one by one, weighed and an incision made in order to examine them inside as well as out. This allows the pathologist to look for anything unusual, or clues to the cause of death. X-rays and photographs may be taken (see later section).

Some people choose to donate tissue samples or organs from their relative's body for use in teaching or research, but unless you have given permission for this, the organs will be returned to the body before it is released.

When will the post mortem be undertaken?

Post mortems are usually carried out within 72 hours of death because the earlier the examination is held, the more likely it is to yield useful information. If because of your religion you must have a funeral within 24 hours, please let the Hospital or Coroner's officer know and the pathologist will try to do the post mortem within this time limit. The Coroner's officer will normally be able to let you know the date, time and place of a post mortem ordered by the Coroner.

There are two types of post mortem:

Coroner's post mortem

By law a Coroner can order a post mortem examination to be done. There are three main reasons why a death is referred to the Coroner:

- A death has been sudden and unexpected.
- A person has been ill but the doctor confirming death is not certain why it happened at that particular time.
- A death has been the result of an accident or unusual circumstances (including death following a medical procedure such as surgery).

Voluntary post mortem

These are requested by doctors or by relatives. Full, signed agreement must be given by the relatives for this type of post mortem to be carried out. You can make restrictions for this type of post mortem.

You should have the opportunity and the time to discuss your decision with your partner, doctor, nurse, or health visitor. You will be asked to sign the consent form which specifies what you have agreed to. You will be given a copy of the completed form.

Filling in the consent form

You can say exactly what can and cannot be done regarding the post mortem. The person who discusses the post mortem with you will be able to explain what the options are. The following information refers to the sections on the consent form:

1. Agreement to a full post mortem examination

The pathologist, working to standards set by the Royal College of Pathologists, will remove and examine all the major internal organs (or those agreed beforehand with you) and will take samples of tissue and fluid (such as blood) for later examination in detail. The organs are then returned to the body (although they cannot be returned to their original position).

A full examination would not in any way prevent you from viewing the body after it has taken place. Not all assessments can be made only with the naked eye and so it may be necessary to retain samples of tissue for later study under the microscope, or for other investigations. These are small pieces of tissue (usually less than 2.5cm across), which are placed into wax blocks, from which microscope slides are made. These would normally be retained as part of the pathology record.

2. Limiting the post mortem examination

You may be uncomfortable with the idea of a full post mortem examination. If that is the case you may be asked to consider agreeing to a limited post mortem examination. This could involve removal and examination only of those organs directly involved in your relative's illness. This may, however, mean that no information will be available about possible abnormalities present in other organs, but which may have contributed to the death of your relative.

We hope that you will feel able to agree to a full examination. However, if you wish to limit the examination in any way, for example to only part of the body, please explain the restrictions that you would like to make to the person asking for consent. To avoid any misunderstanding, she (he) will write down exactly what you would like us **NOT** to do.

3. Agreement to use of tissue and fluid samples taken during the post mortem in medical research

With your consent tissue blocks and slides can be used in research which may benefit other people in future. When a new disease or health problem emerges, examination of tissue on a wide scale may provide clues about how and why the disease emerged – and how to respond. Special committees must approve any research, to make sure it is ethical, and that sufficient consent has been given. Tissue must not be used for research without your agreement.

4a. Agreement that whole organs and tissue be retained for more detailed examination

Sometimes organs need to be fixed (preserved with chemicals) before samples can be taken. In this case, it may be some weeks before the organs can be returned to the body.

4b. Agreement that whole organs retained after the post mortem be donated for medical research, education or audit

With your permission an organ or part of an organ might also be retained for use in medical research or education. If the organ shows a particularly clear example of a specific illness, it may play an important role in the education of medical students, doctors and nurses.

4c. Agreement on how any remaining organs and tissue be disposed of following the post mortem

If specific organs or parts of organs are retained for a long period, it will not be possible for the tissue or organs to be buried or cremated with the deceased. Once the Coroner's duties have been completed, you decide what happens to tissue, as next-of-kin.

You have three options:

- You can ask for any organs and tissue that have been retained to be returned to the funeral director (or direct to you) once the tests are complete. You will then need to arrange a separate cremation or burial for these.
- You can delay the funeral so that organs and tissue may be returned to the body for burial or cremation.
- You can ask the Hospital to dispose of the organs and tissue in a lawful way, by incineration at the Hospital.

5. Other requests or concerns

If you have any particular requests or concerns, please write them here. Hospital staff will also record here any special instructions.

6. Signature of next-of-kin (relative or partner)

You will be asked to sign the form in the presence of a witness. The witness may be anyone who is not a member of your family, for example: friend, neighbour, or member of hospital staff.

7. Signature of member of staff seeking consent

The staff member who has discussed this with you will sign the form and give you a copy.

Does the Hospital keep tissue samples removed during the post mortem?

Yes, in particular if they have been made into blocks and slides for examination under a microscope. They can be very useful because ways of examining tissues improve year on year.

Tissue blocks and slides may be used in training doctors and other health professionals. They are also helpful for quality assurance and audit purposes. For example, tissue samples may be needed to check on standards in a Hospital pathology service. These are retained as part of the Pathology Record and securely stored.

Are photographs taken during the post mortem?

The pathologist may take X-rays or other images (including photographs and CT scans) of part of the body or of an organ during the examination, to be studied again later. These

images are usually kept indefinitely as part of the person's medical records. If you object to photographs being taken, you must say so.

What if I get confused about what I'm agreeing to?

The Hospital staff or Coroner's officer should make sure you know enough about the post mortem examination to decide if you wish to give your consent. They will discuss the alternatives with you. Although they may recommend a particular option, it is important that you come to your own decision. They will ask you to say whether you have understood the information you have been given. If you are not sure, don't hesitate to say so.

Will I be able to ask questions?

You can ask as many questions as you like. You may also want to discuss the decision about a post mortem examination with other family members.

Withdrawal of consent

If you change your mind before the post mortem has taken place you can modify or withdraw your consent even after signing. We or the Coroner's Office will tell you how much time you have in which to do this.

Summary

- The post mortem is an important medical examination that aims to provide more information about your relative's cause of death.
- A post mortem cannot take place without your written consent (unless the Coroner is involved).
- A Coroner can legally authorise a post mortem in some circumstances, and his permission is needed before the body can be released for the funeral to take place.
- The post mortem will be carried out as soon as possible after consent. Usually this is within 72 hours after death.
- We always send a copy of the post mortem report to your relative's General Practitioner, and so if you would like to know more about our findings you will be able to discuss them with him/her.

Useful telephone contacts

Bereavement Care Services
Box 136
Addenbrooke's Hospital
Hills Road
Cambridge CB2 0QQ
Tel: 01223 217537

Coroner's Officer
Box Res 1407
Hospital Shire Hall
Castle Hill
Cambridge CB3 0AP
Tel: 01223 717587

Support and further information

Most people will experience the loss of someone important in their lives. Death is a part of life, it is inevitable and sooner or later we all have to face up to the reality of it.

Through grieving we learn how to continue to function in spite of our losses. How well we manage this seems to affect our quality of life and how we subsequently relate emotionally to others throughout our lives.

Death today is often a taboo subject. With improved medical knowledge our expectations are that we, and those close to us, will live well into old age. How painful it is then when a child dies or for children to experience the death of a parent. The family is changed forever.

Relatives and friends often think it is best to say nothing to the bereaved, but this is not helpful. Many bereaved people who are ignored by others quickly learn that to hide their feelings is more acceptable. However, it is by acknowledging the loss and finding ways of accepting the reality that the bereaved are helped to express their painful feelings and allowed to grieve for the person who has died.

The grieving process

Symptoms of grief

- Anger
- Blaming yourself
- Crying spells
- Diarrhoea
- Dizziness
- Fast heartbeat
- Feeling like there's a lump in our throat
- Feeling like what's happening around you isn't real
- Headaches
- Hyperventilating -- sighing and yawning
- Nausea
- Not being able to get organised
- Not feeling hungry or losing weight
- Restlessness and irritability
- Sadness or depression
- Seeing images of the dead person
- Shortness of breath
- Tightness in your chest
- Tiredness
- Trouble concentrating
- Trouble sleeping

What is grief?

It is natural to grieve. Grief is a normal, healthy response to loss. One of the greatest losses that can occur is the death of someone you love. Other losses include the loss of your health or the health of someone you care about, or the end of an important relationship, such as through divorce. Healing from a loss involves coming to terms with the loss and the meaning of the loss in your life.

What are the normal feelings of grief?

As you face a loss, you may have different feelings at different times. These feelings include shock, denial, anger, guilt, sadness and acceptance. You may find yourself going back and forth from one feeling to another. Your grief may never completely go away. But the pain you feel will lessen with time as you work through these feelings.

What usually happens first?

In the first hours or days after the loss, you may feel shocked, numb and confused. You may not remember what people are saying to you. You may feel dazed and as though you're going through things like a robot. You may think and act as though the loss hasn't occurred. This is called denial.

Bereavement Care in Addenbrooke's

At the time of bereavement Addenbrooke's offers support through the following:

A) Ward Staff

Staff on the ward are available before, during and after a bereavement to help and support patients and families and to call upon other bereavement support agencies within the Trust (for example: chaplaincy).

B) Bereavement Care Services (contact 01223 217537)

(see 'What happens Next' leaflet)

Bereavement Care Service will help to sort out many practical issues after a bereavement.

c) Chaplaincy Team (contact 01223 217769)

The Chaplaincy team is always available for staff, patients and families at any time before, during or after a bereavement

d) Mortuary/Chapel of rest staff (contact 01223 245151)

The Chapel opening times are 0900-1930 hours. The team can also offer support out of hours.

Bereavement Care from outside agencies

There are links to other groups and agencies that provide support as you travel through the grieving process from the Addenbrooke's website (www.addenbrookes.nhs.uk). This information is also available at PALS or from the Chaplaincy.

Tips on dealing with a loss

- Talk about how you're feeling with others.
- Allow yourself to grieve-to cry, to feel numb, to be angry or to feel however you're feeling.
- Try to keep up with your daily tasks so you don't feel overwhelmed.
- Get enough sleep, eat a well-balanced diet and exercise regularly.
- Avoid alcohol. Alcohol can make you feel more depressed.
- Get back into your normal routine as soon as you can.
- Avoid making major decisions right away.
- Ask for help if you need it.

Please ask if you require this information in other languages, large print or audio format: 01223 216032 or patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk

Potete chiedere di ottenere queste informazioni in altre lingue, in stampato grande o in audiocassetta.

Italian

若你需要本信息的繁體中文、大字體或音訊格式的版本，請要求索取。

Cantonese

तमने आ माळिती बीछ भाषाओमां, मोटा अक्षरोमां अथवा सांभली शकाय जेवा माध्यम (ओडीओ इमेज)मां जेठती छोय तो कृपा करीने पूछो.

Gujarati

تکایہ پرسیار بگہ نہ گہر نہ وزانیاریہت دہوی بہ زمانیکی تر . بہ پیتی گہورہ یانیش بہ شیودہی دہنگ

Kurdish

آگر آپ کو یہ معلومات دوسری زبانوں میں، بڑے الفاظ کی اشاعت میں یا آڈیو ٹیپ پر درکار ہوں تو براۓ مہربانی اس کیلئے درخواست کریں۔

Urdu



Addenbrooke's is smoke-free. Please do not smoke anywhere on the site. For advice on quitting, contact your GP or the NHS smoking helpline free, 0800 169 0169

Document history

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