

*The*

WHEN A PERSON DIES  
**HOSPITAL AUTOPSY PROCESS**

information for family and friends



DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

Government  
of South Australia



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# INTRODUCTION

This booklet has been prepared to provide information about hospital autopsies. It explains what an autopsy is, why it is considered important and the choices you can make. You have the right not to know and not to choose.

If you do want to know more, we ask that you read this booklet before making any decisions. If you do agree to an autopsy you will need to complete a form which will be given to you.

Many people find this a difficult time to be making decisions. If you have any questions you should ask the hospital staff who discuss the autopsy with you. It often helps if you speak with your family, your doctor or someone close to you.



# WHAT IS AN AUTOPSY?

**A**n autopsy (also known as a post-mortem examination) is a step-by-step examination of the outside of the body and of the internal organs<sup>1</sup> by a doctor called a pathologist, who is specially trained in this type of work. The autopsy is carried out in a mortuary in a respectful manner and with regard to the wishes of the family.

The body is opened by making incisions in the chest, abdomen and head so that the organs can be removed and examined. During autopsy, small tissue<sup>2</sup> samples are taken for detailed examination under a microscope.

Sometimes some body tissues and organs require specialised examination and it may be necessary to retain entire organs for a more detailed examination.

Once the autopsy is completed, the incisions are carefully closed but can be seen if the body is uncovered. A normal viewing of the body can be held after an autopsy.

## Time frame for an autopsy

The autopsy is performed as soon as possible after permission has been given by the senior available next of kin. This is usually within 48 hours after death has occurred.

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<sup>1</sup> An organ is made up of a collection of different tissues which form a distinct structure in the body and perform a particular function eg. heart, brain, liver, kidney.

<sup>2</sup> A tissue is a small sample (typically about 0.5cm thick) usually taken and prepared for examination under the microscope.



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## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF AN AUTOPSY?

**A**n autopsy will provide detailed information about what caused the person's death. Even if the cause of death seems clear, the person may have had a medical problem that was not known during life.

The autopsy may identify an undiagnosed infection, cancer, blockage in a blood vessel, a genetic disorder or a complication of treatment. This information can be important for other family members' future health and to help them come to terms with the death.



# WHO DECIDES IF THERE SHOULD BE AN AUTOPSY?

## Coronial autopsy

A death in a hospital is reported to the Coroner if it has occurred in the following ways:

- within 24 hours of admission (if the death is not thought to be from natural causes),
- if death occurs during an anaesthetic procedure or within 24 hours of the person having an anaesthetic,
- if a person is certified by a doctor as "Dead on Arrival" at a hospital.

Other circumstances in which a death is reported to the Coroner include death from unusual, suspicious or unknown causes, or unexpectedly. These may include assault, accident and suicide. Deaths in some other situations, such as deaths in custody and some deaths in institutions, must also be reported.

There does not have to be anything suspicious about the death for the Coroner to be involved. The Coroner's role is to establish the cause and circumstances of death.

If the Coroner requests an autopsy to be performed, permission from the family is not required for a coronial autopsy to take place, but it is important the family is informed.

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This booklet provides information about hospital (non-coronial) autopsies only, for more information about coronial autopsies please contact the Social Worker at the State Coroner's Office by phoning (08) 8204 0600.

## Hospital autopsy

The family may ask the doctor to arrange for an autopsy to be performed, or a doctor may ask the family for permission to carry out an autopsy to help find out why the person died.

A hospital autopsy is not performed without seeking the permission of the family.

Hospital staff will respect and support whatever decision the senior available next of kin makes about a hospital autopsy.



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## WHO GIVES PERMISSION FOR AN AUTOPSY?

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**T**he senior available next of kin is the person who will be asked to give permission for an autopsy to be performed. He or she will be required to sign an Autopsy Request and Authority Form.

In order of priority, the senior available next of kin is the:

- spouse, son or daughter over 18 years, parent, brother or sister over 18 years.

If a child has died, the senior available next of kin in order of priority is the:

- parent, sister or brother over 18 years, guardian of the child.

A copy of the completed Autopsy Request and Authority Form will be provided to this person.

If you have any questions about this process, you should discuss these with the medical officer seeking permission for the autopsy.

# A ARE THERE ALTERNATIVES TO A FULL AUTOPSY?

**W**hen you give permission for an autopsy to be performed, you can decide if you want a full autopsy or a limited autopsy to be carried out.

A full autopsy involves a detailed examination of all the internal organs including the brain, heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, intestines, stomach, reproductive organs, blood vessels and small glands.

You may only want to give permission for a limited autopsy. You will need to indicate on the Autopsy Request and Authority form the part or areas of the body that you do not want to have examined. This will limit the information gained but will still be a valuable procedure. The hospital will respect your wishes.

This matter can be discussed with the hospital staff member who speaks to you about the autopsy.



## IS IT POSSIBLE TO DONATE ORGANS OR TISSUES FOR TRANSPLANTATION?

**M**any people have indicated their desire to be an organ donor after their death. The person may have done this by registering on the Australian Organ Donor Registry, by indicating their wish to donate on their driver's licence, or simply telling a family member. Not all deaths provide the right conditions for organs to be donated. It is important to honour these wishes when possible.

You may be asked about organ donation for transplantation. A staff member from the SA Organ Donation Agency will be available to discuss all aspects of organ donation and transplantation with families. The hospital can also arrange for a counsellor to discuss any issues that you may have.

Further information is available from the SA Organ Donation Agency by telephoning 8207 7117 (or the hospital has contact details for after hours).



# ARE ANY ORGANS OR TISSUES RETAINED AFTER AN AUTOPSY?

Once the autopsy is completed, organs are returned to the body unless required for further tests. Tissues, and sometimes whole organs, may be taken for further examination to allow a full diagnosis to be made. Permission of the senior available next of kin will be required for the retention of organs for further testing. Organs that have been retained for further tests can be returned to the body when the tests are complete.

## **Organs and tissues retained for research and education**

Permission is required for tissues and organs to be retained and used for research or education and training. This permission may be requested for research projects approved by the Hospital Ethics Committee for teaching purposes including medical museum use, or for discussion between specialist doctors.

The senior available next of kin can withdraw their permission at any time by contacting the hospital staff member who spoke to them about the autopsy or by writing to the Chief Executive Officer of the hospital.



## WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS FOR RETURN OR DISPOSAL OF ORGANS?

**W**hen you give permission for an autopsy to be performed, you will need to decide what will happen to the organs and tissues once all the tests have been completed.

You will be given a number of choices including whether the organs and tissues should be:

- disposed of by the hospital (this is usually by incineration), or
- returned to the body before the funeral (however this may delay the funeral and it is sometimes difficult to predict for how long), or
- given to the funeral director for burial in accordance with the wishes of the family.



## HOW DO I FIND OUT ABOUT THE RESULTS OF AN AUTOPSY?

The senior available next of kin may choose to discuss the autopsy results with the doctor responsible for the care of the deceased. Alternatively the senior available next of kin can choose a General Practitioner to receive the autopsy results and to discuss the findings with them.

A plain language version of the autopsy report is also available from the hospital if requested.

If the autopsy was performed for the State Coroner, the senior available next of kin will need to contact the Coroner's Office on 8204 0600 for more information about the autopsy report.



## WHEN CAN FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS BE MADE?

**A** funeral director should be contacted as soon as possible after death and they will contact the hospital regarding the release of the body.

If you decide that a hospital autopsy shall be performed, the person's body will be released to the funeral director, usually two or three days after death (although it may be later if the death occurs on a weekend or public holiday). Also, if the decision has been made to return organs to the body then the funeral may be delayed. It is difficult to predict in advance how long this will take.

Funeral directors are used to cooperating with mortuary departments to meet the needs of bereaved families. For example, an autopsy will not interfere with any wishes to have the body embalmed.



# WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE TO YOU?

## **Cultural and religious support**

Autopsies have been performed on deceased persons from a wide range of cultural and religious backgrounds. If you are aware of any cultural or religious practices/beliefs that should be respected during the autopsy process it is important that you tell the staff.

If you have any questions, you are encouraged to talk with someone who can give you cultural or religious support. Hospital staff can help you to contact an appropriate person.

## **Information in other languages**

This booklet is available in other languages. Hospital staff can help obtain a translated copy of this booklet or arrange for an interpreter service to assist people where necessary.

## **Mementos**

When an autopsy is carried out on a baby, it is usual for the staff to prepare a memento pack. This may include photographs, foot and hand prints, nameband and hair if possible. The memento pack may be available for some time

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after the baby has died. However, families are encouraged to collect the memento pack as soon as possible after the autopsy of the baby.

If you are not considering an autopsy but wish to have a memento pack for your baby, this can be arranged.

Please speak to the hospital staff for more information.

## **Information and bereavement support**

If you have any questions the hospital staff or pathology department will try to answer them for you. The hospital can help you access bereavement support when requests for autopsies are made. This service will be able to help you with a variety of personal and practical problems.

The hospital staff can also provide you with literature and contact details of a wide range of support groups who are available to assist you to cope with your grief.

