

Information about Autopsy

Having an Advance Care Plan for health care is a smart thing to do. Like all planning for the future, it involves thinking ahead.

Most of us make plans for the future for all sorts of situations. In the health care setting, advance planning involves thinking about what you would do if you become so ill that you could no longer communicate with your loved ones or your doctors. You may be in excellent health right now, or you may have a chronic illness or a serious and incurable condition. But what if you were terribly injured or suffered a catastrophic illness and suddenly were unable to hear or speak with your loved ones or the doctors and nurses treating you?

What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is a medical procedure performed by a medical doctor who is specially trained in pathology—the study of disease. The doctor will examine the outside and inside of the body looking for diseases and/or injuries. To examine the inside of the body, a surgical incision is made on the chest, stomach and back of the head. Small samples of the organs are taken and processed into microscopic slides so that the doctor can examine the tissues for cancer, infections or other diseases. Other tests may also be done to study genes or check for drugs, chemicals or other substances. After the autopsy is completed, the incisions are closed with stitches. The doctor then writes a report that becomes part of the patient's medical record. The doctor or hospital representative can answer any other questions you might have.

Why should an autopsy be done?

THE AUTOPSY IS IMPORTANT TO FAMILIES BECAUSE:

- It can help answer questions about the person's death.

- It can provide information about the illness and the cause of death.
- It can provide comfort in knowing that everything medically possible was done to help the person.
- It provides information about cancers, genetic diseases or infections that could affect other family members.
- It can help to settle insurance claims.

THE AUTOPSY IS IMPORTANT TO SOCIETY BECAUSE:

- It helps doctors learn more about diseases and treatments.
- It can provide information to help other people who might have the same disease.
- It can provide information about causes of injuries in car accidents, falls and other situations to improve safety.
- It can provide information so that research money can be given to study new diseases and treatments for disease.

Will the autopsy affect funeral plans?

No. The autopsy takes two to four hours to be done, so there is usually no delay. It does not affect the viewing during the wake or funeral.

How do I get an autopsy done?

The doctor who took care of your loved one should ask if you would like an autopsy to be done. If the doctor does not talk to you about an autopsy, you can ask your doctor about it. The autopsy cannot be done without family permission except for special cases in which the coroner or medical examiner may order that the autopsy be done. There are special laws that determine which family member is required to sign the consent form. A hospital representative can talk with you about who can sign the consent form.

The family can also make special requests to limit the autopsy to certain parts of the body.

Is there a charge for the autopsy?

If a person dies while in the hospital, there is no charge to the family for the autopsy. There will be a small charge to get a copy of the final autopsy report from the hospital's medical record department.

How do I find out the results of the autopsy?

The doctor who performs the autopsy will give some of the results to the doctor who took care of your loved one within a few days. The final results of the autopsy are usually available within two months and will be sent to the patient's doctor and to medical records to be filed in the patient chart. When the family agrees to have the autopsy done, they should also ask the doctor to schedule a future appointment to talk about the final autopsy results.

Prepared by Elizabeth C. Burton, MD, 2001.