

UWMC ANATOMIC PATHOLOGY: AUTOPSY
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According to the Bylaws of the University of Washington Medical Center, autopsy permission must be requested in each hospital death. Although a request for autopsy must be made in every death, it is recognized that performing an autopsy in every death may not be possible.

Some deaths may fall under the jurisdiction of the King County Medical Examiner. In general, autopsy permission should not be requested until it is determined whether a death falls under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner's Office.

Deaths in which an autopsy should be especially encouraged are as follows:

- Unanticipated death
- Death following unexpected medical complications
- Death occurring during surgery or during a procedure, or death occurring within 48 hours of surgery or invasive diagnostic procedure.
- Death occurring when a patient is being treated with an experimental drug or device, or under a new procedure or unusual therapy, or when the decedent is a participant in a clinical protocol approved by UWMC.
- All deaths in which the cause of death is not known with certainty on clinical grounds.
- All obstetric deaths, that is deaths related to pregnancy or within seven days of delivery.
- All neonatal and fetal deaths.
- When there is concern about the presence of high-risk infectious and/or contagious disease.
- When there is concern about a hereditary disease.
- Death in which it is believed that an autopsy would disclose a known or suspected illness that may have a bearing on the decedent's survivors, or recipients of transplant organs from the deceased.
- Death in which autopsy allays concerns of and provides reassurance to family members and/or the public regarding the death.
- Unexpected or unexplained apparently natural death, in which the King County Medical Examiner's Office has waived jurisdiction (assigned a no jurisdiction assumed (NJA) number), including but not limited to persons found dead on arrival at the hospital and deaths occurring within 24 hours of admission to hospital.

No fee or charge is associated with the autopsy on UH patients (see below for autopsies on UH patients who die out of the hospital).

For an autopsy to be performed, permission must be obtained from the legal-next-of-kin. The Autopsy Consent must be filled out completely. The authorization must be obtained from the highest priority legal-next-of-kin for autopsy. **The ORDER OF PRIORITY FOR AUTOPSY is unlike other medical procedures and is different from that for donation of organs and tissues for transplantation purposes.** According to RCW 68.50.101, the order of priority for legal-next-of-kin for autopsy is:

1. Surviving spouse (even if separated, unless legally divorced)
2. Child of the decedent, 18 years of age or older
3. One of the parents of the decedent
4. Any adult brother or sister of the decedent
5. A legal guardian of the decedent at the time of death
6. Any other person or agency authorized or obliged to dispose of the remains of the decedent.

It is important to recognize that durable medical power of attorney ends at death and cannot be used to authorize autopsy (unless specific mention of authorization of autopsy is made in the power of attorney documents). However, a competent adult person may authorize his/her own autopsy prior to death, and that permission supersedes any priority by legal-next-of-kin.

For the Autopsy Consent to be valid, the physician or obtaining consent must sign as witness to the consent.

There must be an entry on every line/space of the Autopsy Permit. In particular the **Restrictions** section must be filled in. The family may limit or restrict the autopsy to any extent that they wish. Common limitations are to exclude the examination of the brain, or to exclude donation of tissue for research and/or development of diagnostic/therapeutic products.

A properly completed Autopsy Information Form must accompany the consent, in order for an autopsy to be performed. The Autopsy Information Form should indicate the clinical questions, the potential autopsy hazards, and areas of special interest to be addressed at autopsy, as well as list the names of physicians to be contacted for clinical information prior to performance of the autopsy. In general, every attempt will be made to contact a resident and/or attending physician prior to beginning the autopsy examination.

The autopsy is a non-mutilating procedure, and the decedent can be viewed after autopsy as represented at funeral. Our consent specifies the removal, retention, and use of organs, tissues, and fluids, including brain and skin for educational, scientific, and research purposes, including development of diagnostic and therapeutic products (limitations may be made by the family). It is important that individuals giving permission for the autopsy examination give a truly informed consent. The doctor who discusses this with the next-of-kin must be the individual who decides how much they need and want in the way of detailed information. Family members may be referred to Anatomic Pathology Staff (available at 598-4205, or via paging) for further information

No fee or charge is associated with the autopsy on University Hospital patients. A preliminary report is available in several days, and a written report is available in approximately eight weeks when the autopsy is performed at UWMC Hospital Pathology Autopsy Service. The report will be sent to the physicians whose names are written on the Autopsy Permit. It is the responsibility of the attending physician listed on the Autopsy Consent to convey the autopsy information to the family, along with a copy of the autopsy report (if the family has indicated on the consent that they want to receive a report). Generally, UWMC Hospital Pathology does not send autopsy reports to family members. The next-of-kin may also obtain a copy of the autopsy report from Medical Records.

For a patient who dies outside of UWMC, autopsies can be performed at UWMC at no charge, except for the cost of transportation of the body to UWMC, which must be paid by either the family or other funds (research, departmental, etc.). The hospital has no funds to pay for body transportation. There is a procedure established to facilitate performance of autopsies in out-of-hospital deaths; contact the Autopsy/Decedent Affairs Office for assistance (206-598-4205).

Autopsies are generally performed Monday through Friday from 9 – 4 pm. However, autopsies may rarely be performed on weekends or evenings, should that be necessary because of medical indications, religious requirements, or disposition/transport related issues. Should there be a question related to scheduling of an autopsy, the Autopsy/Decedent Affairs Coordinator and/or Director of Autopsy Service should be contacted.

For questions or concerns about autopsies, please contact the UWMC Decedent Affairs/Autopsy Coordinator at 206-598-4205 (or through paging at 206-598-6190), or the Decedent Affairs/Autopsy Director (206-598-6403 or 206-598-6400).