

Patient Education

After Death Services



When a Loved One Dies in the Hospital

Answers to common questions

We are deeply sorry for your loss and we understand that this handout may be hard to read at this time.

This handout answers common questions that family members and others have when a loved one dies in the hospital. It also provides phone numbers and Web site addresses for resources you may need, as well as suggestions about where to call or look for more information.

Patient Name _____

Nursing Unit _____ Phone _____

Attending Doctor _____ Phone _____

Resident Doctor _____ Phone _____

Other Contacts _____ Phone _____

_____ Phone _____

How do we find out what caused the death and/or details about the time leading up to the death?

When a death occurs, it can help to have information so that family and friends can attempt to make some sense of the loss. At University of Washington Medical Center (UWMC), we encourage family and loved ones to talk with the attending doctor.

The doctor can answer questions about the dying process and possible cause of death. Please tell your nurse that you would like to speak with the doctor as soon as possible. If the doctor is not available, the nurse can provide you with the name and contact information for the attending doctor.

Another way to find out the cause of death is to have an autopsy performed by doctors in the UWMC Anatomic Pathology Department. There is more information about autopsies on pages 2 and 3.

Now that a loved one has died, what are some of the first things we should do?

Nothing has to be done right away at the time of death. There will be decisions to make and activities that will require follow-up. There is also some time to absorb the loss. Some people find it comforting to attend to the tasks that need to be done.

A social worker can listen and talk with you about some of the things that will need to be done and about decisions that will need to be made. If you would like to meet with a social worker, please talk to the nursing staff or call Social Work and Care Coordination at 206-598-4370.

In the hospital, there are tasks that the medical staff will attend to, which will require family input. These include:

- Finding out if the deceased person could be an organ or tissue donor.
- Asking the family to consider having an autopsy performed.
- Working with the funeral home to complete the death certificate.

Family members or the legally appointed representative of the person who has died will need to decide:

- If they want to give consent for organ and/or tissue donation. This decision usually must be made within a few hours of the death.
- Whether or not they want an autopsy to be done (if autopsy is not required by law, as discussed on page 3). This decision can be delayed for several days, but an autopsy must be performed before funeral, burial, or cremation, and there may be scheduling issues to be considered.
- Where their loved one's body will go for funeral, burial, or cremation arrangements. This decision can be delayed for several days.

Some of the tasks related to the legal aspects of the death are explained in detail in other handouts in the bereavement packet. There is a helpful list in the publication *Planning a Funeral* about what needs to be done after a death in relation to Social Security and Veteran's benefits, life insurance, wills, bank accounts, and more.

Will someone be asking about organ donation?

At UWMC, whenever a patient dies or is declared brain dead, or when death is considered to be medically "imminent" we notify LifeCenter Northwest. This is the local organization responsible for organ and tissue donation.

Many things must be considered when determining if a patient can be an organ or tissue donor. If the patient is a possible donor, a representative of LifeCenter Northwest will contact the family or the person with durable power of attorney. You may call LifeCenter Northwest at 866-266-4466 or visit their Web site at www.lcnw.org.

What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is a medical diagnostic procedure that is performed after death and may help to find the cause of death or diagnose the disease that caused symptoms in a patient. An autopsy is performed by a medical doctor with subspecialty training in pathology. At UWMC, it is the hospital policy to offer the option of autopsy whenever a patient dies. If the family gives permission for an autopsy, there is no charge to the family for the

procedure. This is because the hospital considers autopsy to be a procedure that can provide valuable information to help the family understand about their loved one's death, help in the education of doctors, nurses, and other health care providers, and help to improve medical treatment and diagnosis for other patients.

For an autopsy to be done at UWMC, permission must be given by the person authorized by Washington state law to give consent for autopsy, and that family member has to fill out the *Autopsy Consent Form*. The form contains the list of persons authorized to give consent for an autopsy under Washington state law, in order of priority.

There is a brochure explaining more information about autopsy available at the nursing station, or for more information, you may contact Autopsy and After Death Services in the UWMC Anatomic Pathology Department at 206-598-4205 to talk with one of the pathologists or staff members.

Are autopsies ever done even if not requested?

An autopsy will never be done at UWMC unless permission is given by the person authorized by Washington state law to give consent for autopsy. However, in some cases, an autopsy may be required by law. This happens because of the type of death or circumstances surrounding the death, such as deaths related to drug overdoses, injuries, and accidents. If this is the case, the death is reported to the King County Medical Examiner's Office (KCME). If the Medical Examiner becomes involved, an autopsy may be performed at the office of the KCME.

If the pathologists at KCME decide that an autopsy must be performed, the law allows them to do so without permission from the family. In these cases, the KCME will try to contact the family of the deceased and discuss the need for the autopsy. There is no charge for a KCME autopsy. The King County Medical Examiner's Office can be reached at 206-731-3232.

May the family or loved ones ask for an autopsy?

Yes. Usually at UWMC, the family members of a patient who has died will be asked for permission to perform an autopsy, but if they have not been asked, family may request that an autopsy be performed. For an autopsy to be performed at UWMC, permission must be given by the person authorized by Washington state law to give consent for an autopsy. If permission is denied, or the person authorized to give autopsy consent cannot be located, no autopsy will be done. If permission is granted, the consenting person can also specify what parts of the body may be examined, and may want to consult with the attending doctor or a pathologist when making that decision.

How long will the body stay in the patient room?

We recognize that you may want time with your loved one after death. If there is a delay of more than a few hours after the death, the body may need to be moved from the patient room. Nursing staff is responsible for the coordination of the transfer and communication with the family.

Where does the body go once it leaves the patient room?

Bodies are taken to a secure, refrigerated area, also called the morgue, located in the hospital. Bodies can be kept at UWMC for several days until the family has chosen a funeral home or agency for burial or cremation. After the family has made a selection, staff from the funeral home or agency will arrange to transport the body.

UWMC does not provide cremation, burial, or funeral services for deceased adults. No autopsy or other procedure will be performed by UWMC unless the family has given permission for the procedure.

We have family coming from out of town who will want to view the body. Can they view the body at the hospital?

Most times, viewing of the body is done at the funeral home chosen by the family. However, we know that sometimes that is not possible. If there is a delay of more than a few hours after the death, the body may need to be moved from the patient room to be kept in the hospital in the morgue. If it is necessary for the body to be viewed at the hospital, the family can contact nursing staff who will work with After Death Services and Social Work and Care Coordination staff to arrange a viewing.

May we take photos of our loved one?

Yes, photos may be taken in the hospital in the deceased's room if you choose to do so. You may also choose to take photos after the deceased's body has been prepared by the funeral home. Please talk to your nurse or social worker if you wish to take photos in the hospital, so they can help you with this.

What happens to our loved one's belongings?

If family is present when the death occurs, we ask that the family take all the patient's belongings with them. Any items that are left behind are labeled with the patient's name and sent to UWMC Admitting for the family to pick up. The family may authorize their funeral director to pick up the belongings when staff from the funeral home comes to move the body from the hospital to the funeral home.

Is there a list of funeral homes in the area that we can call?

There are many local funeral homes and cremation facilities, and as with any outside service, UWMC does not make recommendations. Instead, we provide information about making this choice (see the handout in your packet, *Planning a Funeral*).

A staff member from our Social Work and Care Coordination Department or After Death Services can assist you with advice and referrals for special situations, such as transport of the body out of state or out of the country.

You may want to select a funeral home or cremation facility based on its location and/or based on recommendations from family or friends. **Once you have made a selection, call UWMC Admitting at 206-598-4310 or After Death Services at 206-598-4205 with the name of the funeral home or cremation facility.** The funeral home or cremation facility staff will transfer the body of the deceased to their facility after making contact with UWMC Admitting and/or After Death Services.

What if we want to do a direct cremation?

Direct cremation means that there is no embalming or other preparation of the body before the cremation. A funeral or memorial service can still be held. A staff member from Social Work and Care Coordination or After Death Services can assist you in finding a direct cremation service, or they are listed in the yellow pages under “cremation services.”

What if we cannot afford a funeral home?

If finances are a concern, ask to talk with a social worker, who can help with problem-solving for lower cost funeral arrangements.

What if we would like to donate the body of our deceased family member to science?

If you would like to consider donating the body of the deceased for scientific purposes, the Department of Biological Structure (sometimes called Anatomy) at the University of Washington has a Willed Body Program. There are certain conditions that must be met for a body to be donated to this program. Contact the Willed Body Program directly to see if they will accept your loved one’s body for donation, by calling 206-543-1860; an informative Web page is located at <http://wbp.biostr.washington.edu/>. The Willed Body Program does not provide autopsy services.

Another way to contribute to medical science is by granting permission for an autopsy at UWMC Anatomic Pathology. Autopsies provide training and education for doctors, medical students, residents in pathology and clinical medicine, and other health care providers and students.

Questions?

Call UWMC Autopsy and After Death Services to speak to the staff and/or physicians in Anatomic Pathology if you have questions about these issues:

206-598-4205

How do we get copies of the death certificate?

Medical staff takes care of completing the cause of death section on the death certificate. Staff from the funeral home or burial/cremation service will require information from the family to complete the personal data portion of the death certificate. The death certificate cannot be filed or certified without this information.

Certified copies of the death certificate can be obtained by the funeral director with whom you are working. Copies may also be purchased from the King County Vital Statistics Department. Call 206-296-4768 or visit their Web site at www.metrokc.gov/health/vital_st/.

Important Phone Numbers and Web Sites

At University of Washington Medical Center

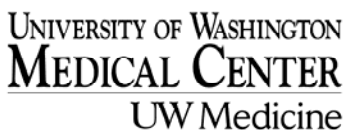
UWMC Main number	206-598-3300
Admitting.....	206-598-4310
Social Work and Care Coordination	206-598-4370
Spiritual Care.....	206-598-4630
UWMC Autopsy and After Death Services (Anatomic Pathology)	206-598-4205

At University of Washington School of Medicine

Willed Body Program.....	206-543-1860
	http://wbp.biostr.washington.edu/

Community

King County Medical Examiner (KCME)	206-731-3232
	www.metrokc.gov/health/examiner
LifeCenter Northwest	888-266-4466
Organ, tissue, and eye donation	www.lcnw.org
King County Vital Statistics.....	206-296-4768
Death certificates	www.metrokc.gov/health/vital_st/



After Death Services

Box 356100
1959 N.E. Pacific St. Seattle, WA 98195
206-598-4205