

AUTOPSY: A WAY TO UNDERSTAND YOUR FAMILY MEMBER'S DEATH

Doctors and family members often want to understand what factors led to illness and death. An autopsy, also called a postmortem examination, provides an opportunity for the medical team and the family to learn more. Answers to remaining questions may help families cope with the loss. There is no charge for autopsy of UCSF patients.

What Is an Autopsy?

An autopsy is a detailed examination of internal organs performed by specially trained physicians. The surgical procedure (2-4 hours) involves opening the body cavities and carefully removing the internal organs to discover any abnormality, document tissue injury due to disease, and determine treatment effects. Autopsy includes taking samples of organs, examining them under a microscope, and doing special tests. Although the family has the right to limit the exam to a part of the body, a complete exam is best for answering all questions, since many conditions involve more than one organ system. For the areas examined, organs typically are kept for additional study, however the family may request that organs be returned to the body.

The body is always treated with dignity and respect. The face and hands are never cut. The brain is reached by a surgical cut made behind the ears over the top of the head. Following autopsy, the incisions are carefully sewn back together and the body made ready for the mortician. When loved ones view the body, no one can tell that an autopsy has been performed.

How Can an Autopsy Help Future Patients?

The entire medical team learns from autopsy findings, and patient care can be improved. In providing tissue samples for further study, the autopsy aids in medical discovery. Autopsy results help public health agencies.

Consent for Autopsy

Consent for the autopsy must be provided by the legal next-of-kin before the procedure can be started. The consent form includes an area to indicate any limitations to the postmortem examination. The form may be completed in person shortly before or after the family member's death or transmitted by facsimile or e-mail. Verbal consents over the telephone are not acceptable.

The final autopsy report becomes a part of the patient's medical record. A copy is sent to the next-of-kin, if requested. Once the autopsy results are available, the patient's doctor will discuss the findings with the family.

Religious Considerations

Families may want to discuss any religious concerns about autopsy with their spiritual advisors.

Questions Regarding Autopsy

For additional information, please contact the medical team or the UCSF Autopsy Service at (415) 353-1629.