

AUTOPSY: A WAY TO UNDERSTAND YOUR CHILD'S DEATH

Sadly, sometimes children are so sick, they die. Doctors and parents want to understand, as best as they can, what factors may have played a role in a child's illness and death.

An autopsy, also called a postmortem examination, provides an opportunity for the medical team and your family to learn more about the illness that led to your child's death. Answers to lingering questions may help you cope with the loss. For some families, the medical information provided by the autopsy may also be helpful in planning future pregnancies. 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 body is always treated with dignity and respect.

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 specific 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 face and hands are never cut, and the arms, legs and feet are rarely examined. 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 Could Your Child's Autopsy Help Future Patients?

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

Consent for Autopsy

Consent for the autopsy of a child must be provided by the parent or guardian before the procedure can be started. The consent form includes an area for parents to indicate any limitations to the postmortem examination. The form may be completed in person shortly before or after the child'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 child's medical record. A copy is sent to the parents or guardian, if requested. Once the autopsy results are available, the child's physician will meet with the parents or guardians to discuss the findings.

Religious Considerations

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

Questions Regarding Autopsy

For additional information, please contact your child's primary medical team or the Autopsy Service, Department of Pathology, UCSF (415-353-1629).