

## **INFORMATION FOR NEXT-OF-KIN REGARDING NON-CORONIAL POST-MORTEM**

When a loved one is close to death or has just died, there are often difficult decisions to be made. One of these is that you may be offered the opportunity as next-of-kin to give your consent for a post-mortem (autopsy) to be performed.

### **What is a post-mortem?**

The examination of the body after death is called an **autopsy** or **post-mortem examination**. A **coroner's autopsy** is held when the state or the police need to have information about a death. A **hospital (non-coronial) post-mortem examination** is different from a coroner's post-mortem. It is performed in hospital, with the consent of the family, and the information obtained can be of great benefit to the family, treating medical staff and future patients.

It can be difficult for you to decide whether or not to give your consent to a post-mortem examination. The information in this pamphlet may help you to make an informed decision.

### **Why is a post-mortem done?**

- A post-mortem examination may be requested by medical staff when the cause of the patient's illness is uncertain.
- Autopsies can also provide information on the success of investigations and treatment methods (e.g. detection of particular infections, side-effects of new therapies).
- Information obtained can be important to our understanding of disease processes. eg. advances in understanding of atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome have been gained through post-mortem examinations.
- In some instances, an autopsy provides information that is important to living family members, especially when there is concern about inherited diseases.
- Occasionally, an autopsy does not provide a definite cause as to the reason for the patient's death. However, this in itself can be reassuring to relatives as evidence that there was no clearly preventable process that contributed to the death.

### **How long will the post-mortem take?**

A post-mortem is performed as soon as possible after consent has been obtained. The post-mortem usually takes about two to three hours.

### **Who performs the post-mortem?**

The performance of a post-mortem is by a specialist doctor called a pathologist. The pathologist is assisted by a scientist. The pathologist has graduated in medicine, and then worked with patients in hospitals or clinics before training in the specialty of pathology.

### **What actually happens to the body of the patient?**

The post-mortem is like a surgical operation and is carried out in a special area very similar to an operating theatre. The pathologist examines the body externally, photographs and X-rays may be taken, then the pathologist makes a cut in the skin from below the neck to the lower abdomen. He/she then removes and looks at all the organs in the chest and the abdomen. The organs are then usually put back. Afterwards the skin is closed with stitches, again similar to those used in surgical operations, and the body is washed. In most post-mortems, the brain is also examined, and this means that the scalp is opened and the skin over the scalp also has to be closed with similar stitches. Alternatively, a limited post-mortem can be performed, where specific organs are not examined.

On completion, the undertaker collects the body. It is important to realise that the patient is still being cared for by medical staff of the hospital and is treated with dignity and respect. Usually, the body can be dressed and viewed after the post-mortem, and this is performed by the undertakers.

### **What happens to the parts of the body that are looked at?**

After the pathologist has looked at the organs in the chest and abdomen, he or she takes a small piece of each organ to look at under the microscope. The samples taken for microscopy are usually the only tissues from the chest and abdomen that are retained. If the brain is to be examined with the naked eye or under the microscope, it has to be kept for several days at least, and for this reason it cannot be returned to the body at the time of autopsy. Similarly, other organs may require further testing and it may be necessary to keep these in the pathology department for up to 6 weeks. Samples of tissue taken at post-mortem may be studied as part of medical research projects with the consent of the next-of-kin and the approval of the hospital Ethics Committee. Specific consent is requested for this as a part of the consent for post-mortem.

### **What is done with the organs once tests have been completed?**

It is always necessary for the hospital to keep small samples of tissue, and possibly samples of bodily fluids, that are taken as part of the post-mortem examination. These samples cannot be returned.

You can request that organs retained for testing be returned to the body prior to the burial/cremation. However, this will generally delay the funeral for a number of weeks. If burial/cremation needs to be delayed the body can be treated by the undertakers, by a process called embalming, to prevent further decay.

Alternatively, organs retained for testing can be disposed of by the hospital in an appropriate and lawful way once they have been fully examined or can be returned to the undertaker for burial or cremation. You can, instead, give specific permission to the hospital to retain such body parts long-term.

If you have donated organs or body parts for teaching, research, scientific or medical purposes, any disposal of such organs will be appropriately undertaken.

### **When will the results of the post-mortem be available?**

A preliminary report will be available within a few days of examination. A full report may take 6-12 weeks.

We suggest that the most effective way for families to receive the information in the post-mortem report is to arrange for the report to be sent to the family doctor. An appointment can then be made for the doctor to discuss the report with family members. Alternatively, an appointment can be made with a specialist who knew the deceased or with the pathologist.

### **Can we speak to anyone about the autopsy?**

Yes. At the time you are asked about whether you will consent to an autopsy, you can talk to the medical staff on the ward. If there are further questions, or if the doctors are unable to answer any of the questions you may have, there is a pathologist on call who can answer your questions. We recognise that a decision regarding autopsy can be a sensitive issue for many families. You should ensure that you are comfortable with the amount of information you have received, and that you feel you can make the right decision for you.