The Autopsy
An important study after a death

What is an autopsy?
An autopsy, also called a post-mortem exam, is done to find out the cause of death of a baby, child, or adult. The inside and outside of the body is checked. Samples of tissues are often checked under a microscope. The exam may include taking cultures to check for organisms that cause infections. Sometimes, other studies are done to diagnose certain biochemical and genetic diseases.

Who does the autopsy?
An autopsy is done by doctors with special training in the diagnosis of disease. They are called pathologists. At University of Washington Medical Center (UWMC), the pathologists have special interest and training in autopsy diagnosis of diseases, and the determination of cause of death.

Why is an autopsy important?
The autopsy exam is important to families, health care providers, and society.

An autopsy may be the only way to correctly define the cause of death. In some cases, the cause of death is known, but the underlying disease process is not. Sometimes diseases were diagnosed before death, but the extent of the disease can only be determined by a complete autopsy exam. By knowing how extensive the disease was, particular problems that arose during treatment may be explained.

An autopsy may also help the doctors who cared for a patient better understand the effects of the treatment that was given. The doctors at UWMC are at the forefront of medical care. They often use new therapies to evaluate, diagnose, and treat difficult cases. Even with the latest tests available, not all problems and effects of therapy can be evaluated without doing an autopsy. The information gained may be useful for guiding treatment for others and in medical research.
Some disease processes identified during an autopsy may have a familial or genetic component. Detecting those diseases at autopsy may help family members and their health care providers to make decisions about medical or genetic screening or about diagnostic procedures. If a disease is genetic, problems may be anticipated and possibly minimized in other affected family members.

Benefits to society include the discovery and description of new disease processes. There is also a benefit to society when the cause of death on the death certificate is accurate. This improves the quality of vital statistics data used in planning health care services and disease prevention efforts.

The autopsy can be very helpful in finding out the cause of death or underlying diseases. Though, in some cases, even a complete autopsy may not provide the answers to all the questions that families or doctors may have.

**What is examined in an autopsy?**

Many diseases involve more than one part of the body. If possible, all organs, including the brain, are examined. This is done even in the absence of signs or symptoms related to a particular organ system. A correct diagnosis may depend on the findings in all organs of the body.

Families may choose to limit the autopsy to certain parts of the body. We recommend that families consult with the deceased patient’s doctor about their wishes. Any limits requested will be listed on the autopsy consent form.

**Will there be visible marks?**

Often, families are concerned that once the autopsy is performed, their loved one’s body will not be suitable for viewing. The incisions made by the pathologist are in places that will not be seen when the deceased person is dressed. The hands and face will not have any marks. With the help of funeral home staff, a full viewing is an option before and during memorial services, and/or at the time of burial.

The deceased person’s body is treated with respect and dignity at all times. Autopsy and After Death Services is part of the care team at UWMC. We share in the concern for the family and relatives.
How long does an autopsy take?
Autopsies are done Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Rarely, an autopsy may be done after hours or on weekends if needed for medical or family reasons.

An autopsy takes about 4 hours. Afterward, the deceased person’s body is available for transport from the hospital.

When will the results be available?
Within 3 days, a preliminary report is sent to the doctors who cared for the deceased patient. If more studies are needed, they can take 4 to 10 weeks to complete. Sometimes, the studies may take even longer, depending on issues related to the disease or death.

The final written report is ready in 12 weeks in almost all cases. It is placed in the deceased patient’s medical chart and a copy is sent to their UWMC doctors.

If desired, you may:
- Ask your loved one’s doctor to send you a copy of the report.
- Talk with your loved one’s doctor about the report.
- Send a written request to UWMC Patient Data Services (Medical Records) to obtain a copy of the report. Send your request to:
  Patient Data Services
  University of Washington Medical Center
  Box 356147
  1959 N.E. Pacific St.
  Seattle, WA 98195
- Call the pathologist at UWMC, or have your loved one’s doctor call, to discuss the initial and final findings. Or, schedule a meeting to better understand the autopsy findings. UWMC Autopsy and After Death Services can be reached at 206-598-4205.

What forms need to be filled out?
When a patient dies, we need to make sure that all things done for the family, health care providers, hospital, and society are documented with care. Family members and the health care workers will need to sign several forms. At the time of death, these forms may seem thoughtless, but they are needed to protect the best interests of the family.
The Autopsy

Autopsies Performed at UWMC

The Autopsy Consent Form is the document giving permission for the autopsy to be performed at UWMC. Washington state law designates which persons are required to give consent for autopsy, and supplies the order in which they must be asked for consent. This ordered list is on the back of the Autopsy Consent Form and must be strictly followed.

Consent for autopsy may be given in one of two forms:

- A witnessed signed consent;
  OR
- A witnessed telephone consent.

If the person who is required by law to give consent does not give consent, the autopsy cannot be done.

Doctors know that it is a very sad time when they ask for permission to do an autopsy. Family members may find it helpful to discuss the autopsy with the doctors, their religious advisor, a social worker, or the pathologist who will be doing the exam. It may also help to read the information on the consent form with care.

Autopsies Performed at the King County Medical Examiner’s Office

In certain cases, the legal system may become involved in the death of a patient. In these cases, the King County Medical Examiner’s Office has the legal authority to perform an autopsy. When this happens, consent is not required for an autopsy, but the family will be contacted. Families will be offered an explanation of the situation and the opportunity to discuss the process with the pathologists there.

Is there an extra charge for an autopsy?

There is no extra fee for an autopsy. UWMC covers the exam costs for any patient who dies at UWMC or was under the direct care or consultation of a UWMC or University of Washington Physician’s Network (UWPN) provider, if this provider requests that an autopsy be performed. If the patient dies somewhere other than at UWMC, payment for transport to UWMC for autopsy will need to be made by the family.

If the patient was not under the direct care or consultation of a UWMC or UWPN provider, a pathologist from UWMC Anatomic Pathology must give approval for autopsy. In this case, the family or the requesting institution pays for the cost of the exam.