The Autopsy
An important study after an infant’s death

What is an autopsy?
An infant autopsy, also called a post-mortem exam, is done to find out the cause of death of a baby. The baby’s body is treated with respect and dignity at all times.

Autopsy and After Death Services is part of the care team at University of Washington Medical Center (UWMC). We share in the concern for the infant’s family and relatives.

Who does the autopsy?
An autopsy is done by doctors with special training in the diagnosis of disease. They are called pathologists. At UWMC, the pathologists have special interest and training in the diseases that affect unborn and newborn infants.

Why is an autopsy important?
The autopsy is important to families, the people who cared for the baby, and society. It may be the only way to correctly determine the cause of death.

Many babies die of inherited diseases that may recur in future pregnancies or affect other family members. These diseases may occur because of genes that have been passed on from the mother and father to the baby. If the cause of death is related to genetics, an autopsy can help anticipate and possibly minimize problems in future pregnancies or in other affected family members. And, others with the same disease may be helped by improved therapies that are developed as a result of the information gained.

An autopsy may reveal that a specific condition affected the mother during pregnancy. Some babies die from infection or a variety of other causes. Some diseases can be diagnosed before death, but the extent of a 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 baby 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.

Many of the diseases affecting babies are not completely understood. As with many problems, the answers can be found only through careful studies. The autopsy allows scientific studies to be done that may lead to cures in the future.

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

**What is examined in an autopsy?**

Many of the diseases that affect infants and children involve more than one part of the body. If possible, all organs, including the brain, are examined. This is particularly important in many genetic (inherited) diseases. A correct diagnosis may depend on the findings in all organs of the body.

**What happens during an autopsy?**

The inside and outside of the body is checked. Samples of tissues are often looked at under a microscope and 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.

**Will there be visible marks?**

Often, families are concerned that this will mean that their baby’s body will not be suitable for viewing after the exam. The incisions made by the doctor are in places that will not be seen when the baby 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.

Families may choose to limit the autopsy to certain parts of the body. After we consult with the infant’s doctor, any limits you request will be listed on the autopsy consent form.
How long does an autopsy take?

Exams 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.

The exam takes about 4 hours. Afterward, the baby’s body is available for transport.

When will the results be available?

Within 3 days, a preliminary report is sent to the doctors who cared for the infant. If additional 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 infant’s medical chart and a copy is sent to their UWMC doctors.

If desired, you may:

• Ask your baby’s doctor to send you a copy of the report.
• Talk with your baby’s doctor about the report.
• Send a written request to UWMC Patient Data Services (Medical Records) to obtain a copy. 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 baby’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. The parent(s) 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.
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Questions?

Call 206-598-4205

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC staff are also available to help at any time.

Autopsy and After Death Services: 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
206-598-4205

Autopsies Performed at UWMC

The Autopsy Consent Form is the document giving permission for the autopsy to be performed at UWMC. Sometimes, other persons, such as a grandparent or legal guardian, may sign the form if the mother and father are not involved in the baby’s care.

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 charge for an autopsy. Although the procedure is very expensive, UWMC covers the cost of an autopsy for any infant who was treated at UWMC or whose mother was treated there during pregnancy.

If the infant dies somewhere other than at UWMC, there may be costs involved in transporting the infant’s body to UWMC. These costs will need to be paid by the family. UWMC and After Death Services can assist with these arrangements.