When a Loved One Dies in the Hospital

Answers to common questions

We are sorry for your loss. We know that this handout may be hard to read at this time.

This handout answers common questions that family members and others have when a loved one dies in the hospital. It also provides phone numbers and website addresses for resources you may need, as well as suggestions about where to find more information.

Families and friends of a patient who has died at a UW Medicine facility often have questions about what happens after the death, what tasks and decisions hospital staff and family members need to take care of, and what resources are available.

We hope this handout answers some of these questions. You may also find this list of phone numbers helpful:

At University of Washington Medical Center (UWMC)

Admitting.......................................................... 206.598.4310
   Call us with the name of the funeral home or cremation facility you will be using.
Autopsy and After Death Services/Anatomic Pathology........ 206.598.4205
   Call us for information about disposition, autopsy, and other issues.
Social Work and Care Coordination............................... 206.598.4370
Spiritual Care.................................................................. 206.598.9174
Main UWMC number ..................................................... 206.598.3300

At Harborview Medical Center (HMC)

Admitting/Nursing Administrative Supervisor .................... 206.744.3085
Autopsy and After Death Services/Anatomic Pathology........ 206.744.3078
   Call us with the name of the funeral home or cremation facility you will be using. You can also ask us for information about disposition, autopsy, and other issues.
Social Work.................................................................206.744.8030
Spiritual Care.................................................................206.744.2757
Main HMC number ......................................................206.744.3000

At University of Washington School of Medicine
Willed Body Program .................................................206.543.1860
http://wbp.biostr.washington.edu

In the Community
King County Medical Examiner (KCME) ......................206.731.3232
www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/examiner.aspx
King County Vital Statistics/Death Certificates .............206.296.4768
www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/vitalstats.aspx

Organ, Tissue, and Cornea Donation
LifeCenter Northwest ..................................................877.275.5269
LifeNet Health Northwest ...........................................800.847.7831
SightLife 24-Hour Donor Coordinator .........................800.214.6356
General information on donation ................... www.donatelifetoday.com

How do we find out what the cause of the death was, or details about the time before the death?
When a death occurs, knowing the cause of death and what led up to the death can help family and friends understand why it happened. We encourage family and loved ones to talk with the attending doctor who managed your loved one's care.

The attending doctor can answer your questions about the dying process and the possible cause of death. Please tell your nurse that you would like to speak with this doctor as soon as possible. If the doctor is not available, the nurse can tell you how to contact the doctor.

Another way to find out the cause of death is to have an autopsy done. There is more information about autopsies on pages 5 and 6.

When a loved one dies, what do we need to do?
In the hospital, there are tasks that the medical staff will do that will require input from the family. These include:

- Working with donation agencies to find out if their loved one might have the opportunity to be an organ, tissue, or cornea donor.
- Asking the family to consider having an autopsy done.
- Working with the funeral home to complete the death certificate.
Family members or the legal representative of the person who has died will need to decide:

- Whether or not they want an autopsy to be done, if an autopsy is not required by law (see page 5). This decision can be delayed for several days, but an autopsy must be done before a funeral, burial, or cremation. There may be scheduling issues to be considered.

- Where their loved one’s body will go for a funeral, burial, or cremation. This decision can be delayed for several days.

Some of the legal tasks involved in a death are explained in detail in other handouts in your Bereavement Packet. There are helpful lists in the handouts “After a Death” and “Planning a Funeral” about what needs to be done after a death to settle Social Security and veteran’s benefits, life insurance, wills, and bank accounts. “Planning a Funeral” also includes general information about choosing a funeral or cremation service.

**What do we do about burial or cremation?**

The hospital does not provide funeral, burial, or cremation services. You may want to choose a funeral home or cremation facility based on its location or advice from family or friends.

There are many funeral homes and cremation facilities in the Seattle area. We do not give advice about them or their services, but we do provide resources to help you make this personal choice. (See the handout “Planning a Funeral” in the Bereavement Packet.)

**After you have decided about funeral, burial, or cremation, please call us with the name of the funeral home or cremation facility:**

**For UWMC Patients**

- Call Admitting at 206.598.4310 or After Death Services at 206.598.4205.
- The funeral home or cremation facility staff will also call UWMC Admitting or After Death Services to arrange to move the body.
- A staff member from Social Work and Care Coordination or After Death Services can help you with special situations, such as moving the body out of the state or country, or finding a direct cremation service.

**For HMC Patients**

- Call After Death Services at 206.744.3078.
- The funeral home or cremation facility staff will also call HMC After Death Services to arrange to move the body.
- A staff member from Social Work or After Death Services can help you with special situations, such as moving the body out of the state or country, or finding a direct cremation service.
What if we want to do a direct cremation?
Direct cremation means that there is no embalming or other preparation of the body before the cremation. A funeral or memorial service can still be held. You can find information about direct cremation by searching for “Cremation Services” on the internet.

What if we cannot afford a funeral home?
If money is a concern, ask to talk with a social worker for ideas on lower-cost funeral arrangements.

What if we would like to donate the body of our deceased family member to science?
Body donation for scientific purposes can only be done under certain conditions. The Department of Biological Structure (sometimes called Anatomy) at the University of Washington has a Willed Body Program that accepts some bodies for donation.

The family must call the Willed Body Program at 206.543.1860 to see if the program will accept their family member's body for donation. Office hours are weekdays, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Since this is a time-sensitive activity, families interested in this are encouraged to call the Willed Body Program as soon as possible after the death occurs. If donation is not accepted, the family will need to make other arrangements for the disposition of their family member's body.

Application to become a body donor can be done before death occurs. To learn more, visit http://wbp.biostr.washington.edu. The Willed Body Program does not provide autopsy services.

Another way to contribute to medical science is to give permission for an autopsy at the Anatomic Pathology department. Autopsies provide training and education for attending doctors, medical students, residents in clinical medicine and pathology, and other healthcare providers and students.

Will someone be asking us about organ and tissue donation?
UW Medicine facilities work with local organ, tissue, and cornea donation agencies and tell them about all deaths that occur in the hospital. These organ and tissue donation agencies include LifeCenter Northwest, LifeNet Health Northwest (formerly Northwest Tissue Services), and SightLife.

Many things must be considered to determine if a patient can be an organ or tissue donor. If a patient can be a donor, the legal next of kin of the patient will be consulted. If organ donation is a possibility, this conversation will occur before ventilator support is stopped. If tissue or cornea donation is an option, family will be contacted within a few hours
after the death has occurred. Many times, the patient is already a registered donor, and this information would be shared with family during the conversation about donation.

To learn more about donation options, family members may also call one of the organizations listed under “Organ, Tissue, and Cornea Donation” on page 2 of this handout.

**What is an autopsy?**

An autopsy is a medical procedure that is sometimes done after death to help find the cause of death or diagnose the disease that caused the patient’s symptoms. An autopsy is done by a medical doctor with special training in *pathology* (the study of disease).

We offer to have an autopsy done whenever a patient dies. There is no charge to the family for the procedure. This is because our healthcare providers believe that an autopsy can provide valuable information to help the family understand their loved one’s death and disease, help educate healthcare providers, and help improve medical treatment and diagnosis for other patients.

For an autopsy to be done, we must receive authorization from the person authorized by Washington state law to give consent for an autopsy. That person must fill out the UW Medicine Consent/Authorization for Autopsy form, and their signature must be witnessed. This form has a list of who is authorized to give consent for an autopsy under Washington state law, in order of priority. The consent/authorization may also be provided by telephone.

A handout called “The Autopsy” explains more about autopsy. It is in your Bereavement Packet. For more information, you can also call Autopsy and After Death Services (see phone numbers on page 1).

**Is an autopsy ever done even if it is not requested?**

An autopsy will never be done at a UW Medicine facility unless permission is given by the person authorized by Washington state law to give consent for autopsy. But sometimes an autopsy is required by law. This happens because of the type of death or details about the death, such as deaths from drug overdoses, injuries, and accidents. If this is the case, the death is reported to the King County Medical Examiner’s Office (KCME). If the Medical Examiner becomes involved, an autopsy may be done at the office of the KCME.

If the pathologists at KCME decide that an autopsy must be done, the law allows them to do so without permission from the family. In these cases, the KCME will try to contact the family to talk about the need for the autopsy. There is no charge for a KCME autopsy. You can call the KCME Office at 206.731.3232.
May the family or loved ones ask for an autopsy?
Yes. Usually, the family members of a patient who has died will be asked for permission to do an autopsy. But if they have not been asked, family members may request that an autopsy be done.

For an autopsy to be done, the person who is authorized by Washington state law to give consent must authorize the autopsy. If authorization is not given, or the consenting person cannot be found, we will not do an autopsy.

If authorization is given, the consenting person can specify what parts of the body may be examined. This person may want to talk with the attending clinician or pathologist (a doctor who studies diseases and their causes) when making that decision.

How long will the body stay in the patient’s hospital room?
We know that you may want time with your loved one after death. The body will need to be moved from the patient room a few hours after the death. Nursing staff will talk with you about this.

Where does the body go once it leaves the patient’s hospital room?
Bodies are taken to a secure, refrigerated area in the hospital, also called the morgue. Bodies can be kept at the hospital for several days until the family has chosen a funeral home or agency for burial or cremation. After the family has made this choice, staff from the funeral home or agency will arrange to move the body.

May we take photos of our loved one?
Yes, you may take photos in the deceased's hospital room if you wish. You may also choose to take photos after your loved one’s body has been prepared by the funeral home.

Please talk with your nurse or social worker if you wish to take photos in the hospital. They can help you with this.

We have family coming from out of town who will want to view the body. Can they view the body at the hospital?
A few hours after the death, the body will be moved from the patient room to the hospital morgue. It is possible to view the body in the morgue, but this must be arranged ahead of time:

- For UWMC patients: Call After Death Services at 206.598.4205, or Social Work and Care Coordination at 206.598.4370.
• **For HMC patients:** Call the Nursing Administrative Supervisor at 206.744.3085, or After Death Services at 206-744-3078.

In general, viewing of the body can be scheduled only during regular work hours.

Most times, viewing of the body is done at the funeral home the family has chosen.

**What happens to our loved one’s belongings?**

If family members are present when the death occurs, we ask them to take all the patient’s belongings with them. Any items that are left behind are labeled with the patient’s name and sent to Admitting for the family to pick up. The family may give their funeral director permission to pick up the belongings when funeral home staff come to the hospital to move the body.

**How do we get copies of the death certificate?**

Medical staff will complete the cause of death section on the death certificate. Staff from the funeral home or burial or cremation service will obtain information from the family to complete the personal data section of the death certificate. The death certificate cannot be filed or certified without this information.

You can get certified copies of the death certificate from the funeral director you are working with. You can also buy copies from the King County Vital Statistics Department. Call 206.296.4768 or visit their website at [www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/vitalstats.aspx](http://www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/vitalstats.aspx).

**What other resources may be helpful?**

Several other handouts may be helpful to families after a death occurs. Some of these are included in your Bereavement Packet. You can also find them online at [https://healthonline.washington.edu](https://healthonline.washington.edu) (use the search word “grief”):

- “After a Death: A guide for the days and weeks ahead”
- “Bereavement Support Services: Resources, support groups, and books”
- “A Guide Through Grief: Mourning the loss of a loved one”

**Questions?**

If you have questions about choosing a funeral home, cremation services, autopsy, death certificates, or other related issues, call the After Death Services for your medical center:

- **UWMC After Death Services:** Call 206.598.4205 and ask to speak with a staff member or doctor in Anatomic Pathology.
- **HMC After Death Services:** Call 206.744.3078.