

An Infant Autopsy

An important study after a baby's death

We are deeply sorry for your loss. We know that it may be hard to read this handout right now. But, we want to explain what an autopsy is and why it is important.

This handout covers what is done in an autopsy, how long it takes, and the how to get the results. It also explains why forms need to be filled out and who pays, if there are charges.



We are deeply sorry for your loss.

What is an infant autopsy?

An infant autopsy is a physical exam to find out the cause of death of a baby. It is also called a *post-mortem exam*. We treat the baby's body 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 their concern for you, the infant's family and loved ones.

Who does the autopsy?

An autopsy is done by a *pathologist*, a doctor with special training in diagnosing disease. At UWMC, our pathologists have special training in finding the cause of death and diagnosing diseases that affect unborn and newborn infants.

Why is an autopsy important?

The autopsy exam is important to families and loved ones, the people who cared for the baby, and society. Sometimes, this exam is the only way to find the true cause of death.

Even if we know what caused the death, a full autopsy may be the only way to know the extent of the condition. When we find out more about the condition, we may learn why certain problems occurred during treatment.

An autopsy may also show that a certain condition affected the mother during pregnancy. Or, some babies die from infection or other causes.

An autopsy can be very helpful in finding the cause of death or underlying diseases. But sometimes, even a full autopsy and special studies may not answer all the questions that families or doctors may have.

Genetic Diseases

Many babies die of inherited (*genetic*) diseases. These diseases may recur in future pregnancies or affect other family members.

Genetic diseases occur because of genes that have been passed on from the mother and father to the baby. If the cause of death is genetic, an autopsy can help parents prepare for and even lessen problems in future pregnancies, or in other affected family members.

Understanding Disease and Treatments

We do not fully understand many of the diseases that affect babies. 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.

An autopsy may also help doctors better understand the effects of any treatment the baby received. The information gained from an autopsy may help guide treatment for others and in medical research.

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 during an autopsy. This is particularly important in many genetic diseases. 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. Talk with the baby's doctor about your wishes. The autopsy consent form will include any limits you request.

What happens during an autopsy?

During the exam, a doctor checks both inside and the outside of the body. The doctor may:

- Take tissue samples and look at them with a microscope
- Take cultures to check for infections
- Do other studies to diagnose certain types of disease

Will there be marks on the body?

Families are often concerned that their baby's body will not be suitable for viewing after autopsy. The autopsy incisions will not be seen when the baby is dressed. Their hands and face will not have any marks. With the help of funeral home staff, there can be a full viewing before and during memorial services, and at the time of burial.

How long does an autopsy take?

An autopsy takes about 4 hours. The baby's body can then be transported from the hospital.

Autopsies are done weekdays 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.

When will we know the results?

A first report is sent to the baby's doctors within 3 days. If more studies are needed, it can take 4 to 10 weeks to get the results. Some studies take even longer, depending on issues related to the disease or death.

Most times, a final written report is ready in 12 weeks. It is placed in the deceased baby's medical chart and a copy is sent to their UWMC doctors.

If you wish, 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 get a copy of the report. Send your request to:

UW Medical Center
Medical Records
Box 359738
325 Ninth Ave.
Seattle, WA 98104

- You or your baby's doctor may call the pathologist at UWMC to talk about the autopsy findings. Or, you can set up a meeting to better understand the findings. To do this, call UWMC Autopsy and After Death Services at 206.598.4205.

What forms need to be filled out?

When a patient dies, we need to make sure to fully document everything that is done for the family, healthcare providers, hospital, and society. The parent(s) and healthcare workers will need to sign several forms. While it may seem insensitive to ask you to sign forms soon after your baby's death, these forms are needed to protect the family's interests.

Autopsies at UWMC

The *Autopsy Consent Form* gives us permission to do the autopsy at UWMC. If the parents are not involved in the baby's care, a grandparent or other legal guardian may sign the form.

We know that it is a very sad time when we ask for permission to do an autopsy. You may find it helpful to talk about the autopsy with the doctors, a religious advisor, a social worker, or the pathologist who will be doing the exam. It may also help to carefully read the consent form.

Autopsies at the King County Medical Examiner's Office

Sometimes, the legal system becomes involved after the death of a patient. When this occurs, the King County Medical Examiner's Office has the legal authority to do an autopsy. They do not need to get the family's consent, but the Medical Examiner's Office will contact the family and explain the situation to them. The family will be able to talk with the pathologists there about the autopsy.

Who pays for the autopsy?

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 help with these arrangements.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Autopsy and After Death Services:
8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
206.598.4205