



The University of Nebraska Medical Center and Nebraska Medicine provides autopsy services to those patients in which a postmortem examination will help to discover the cause of death or the extent of disease. At all times, the body is treated with care, respect and dignity, and the family is involved in the decision process.

Important Contact Information

Acute Bereavement Services Coordinator
402.552.3219

On-Duty Pathology Physician
Pager: 402.888.1380

When connected, please leave your call-back number followed by the # sign

Health Information Management
402.559.6296



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**University of Nebraska
Medical Center**

Nebraska Medicine

Autopsy Information for Families

The death of a loved one can cause tremendous stress and sorrow. We hope this brochure will assist you during the grieving process and help answer questions about the autopsy process.

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What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is an examination that is performed after death consisting of multiple steps. First, a pathologist, who is a doctor who specializes in diagnosing disease, learns about the patient's history from the medical record and through discussion with the patient's doctor and/or family. Second, the pathologist examines the patient's body for any observable abnormalities such as scars or injuries and evidence of medical treatment such as intravenous lines, breathing tube, etc., and this information is documented. Next, the interior of the body is examined during which most of the organs are removed. Small pieces of the organs are sampled and examined under a microscope. All of this information is used to generate an autopsy report. This report will answer the questions asked by either the patient's clinician or family and state the cause of death.

Why request an autopsy?

The next of kin, as determined by law, may want an autopsy performed for a better understanding of why a loved one died. Common causes of death that can be found during an autopsy include heart attack, pneumonia, cancer, and stroke. Often the patient's doctor already knows the cause of death. But if not, an autopsy may help. A patient's physician may also desire an autopsy if there are unanswered clinical questions such as how many organs were effected by a tumor. In this case, however, the next of kin would have to grant permission for such a request. Autopsies also play an important role in educating health professionals, conducting research, and improving patient care.

Questions that the autopsy may not be able to answer include proving that a person had a genetic condition or deciding if the doctor could have provided care differently to prolong the patient's life. Routine drug and poison testing are also not performed. If there is a specific concern that might not be answered by an autopsy, you should contact the on-duty pathology physician to discuss this further.

Are there different types of autopsies?

The next of kin has the right to ask that some organs not be removed during the autopsy. We will always comply with this request. Two commonly requested autopsy types are a complete autopsy and a limited autopsy. A complete autopsy means that the brain and all organs from the chest, abdomen, and pelvis are removed and examined. A limited autopsy involves the removal and examination of only the organs from the torso, including the heart, lungs, and abdominal cavity organs. Another autopsy type that can be requested is an organ specific autopsy to only remove and examine a particular organ such as the heart or brain.

When will the autopsy be completed?

An autopsy is typically performed within one working day after it is requested. The body is released to the funeral home within several hours after the autopsy is complete. The examination of removed tissues and subsequent documentation generally takes 30 business days to complete, but may take up to 60 days depending upon the complexity of the case. At that time, the report is provided to the patient's physician of record.

Will I receive a copy of the autopsy report?

Due to medical legal obligations, an autopsy report is protected health information and is kept confidential. A report will be sent to the patient's physician of record at UNMC/Nebraska Medicine, who may not be their primary care physician. The next of kin can always supply the contact information of the patient's primary care physician, who will then receive a copy of the autopsy report. This will allow families to discuss the report with the patient's primary care physician. The next of kin may also request a copy of the final autopsy report free of charge by contacting Health Information Management.

Are the organs kept?

Organs that are removed during the autopsy are kept by the pathology department for a designated period of time. The reason to keep a patient's organs includes the possible need to take additional pieces of tissue for microscopic examination. This allows a timely release of the body to the family. All tissues are appropriately disposed of 30 days after



the final autopsy report is complete. If you would like the tissue to be returned back to a funeral home, please notate this request on the consent form, which will identify this to the on-duty pathology physician.

Can the body be used for educational or research purposes?

The primary purpose of the autopsy is to determine the cause of death or answer other questions the clinical team or patient's families may have. As UNMC/Nebraska Medicine is a teaching institution, we also use autopsies as teaching tools for our medical residents and other medical specialties. Autopsy tissue maybe used for educational purposes and may occasionally be used for research purposes in compliance with UNMC's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research cannot be performed without prior patient consent.

Other questions

If you have questions about the autopsy process or procedure, please feel free to Spiritual Care Services at 402.552.3219 or page the pathology physician on call at 402.888.1380. Please leave your callback number followed by the # sign and we will attempt to reach you as soon as possible.

