

## Stillbirth Autopsy Information for Parents

### Why is a stillbirth autopsy so important?

The autopsy is the careful examination of the stillborn baby's body after death. It is performed by a pathologist — a doctor with specialized training. The examination of babies who die is important for parents and family members for the following reasons:

- An autopsy is the best way possible to understand how and why your baby died. Although many tests are available to diagnose disease, no test can give a diagnosis with the same degree of certainty as an autopsy. In fact, it serves as a check on the tests themselves. An autopsy is also able to detect medical problems not shown by other types of examinations.
- An autopsy is done to discover whether the medical problem has any genetic (hereditary) importance especially if you are planning to have more children. Hereditary causes are also important information for brothers and sisters, and other family members of the baby who has died. The more complete the medical information available to you and your doctor, the better genetic counseling you will receive.
- The autopsy examination increases medical science's understanding of the disease from which the baby died. In this way, it improves the treatment and the chance of survival of other infants with similar problems.

*An autopsy will not be performed without consent from the parent.*

### What does the autopsy examine?

An autopsy examines various body parts, tissues, and organs. The organs in the body all work together. When one organ is not functioning normally, it may cause problems in many others. It is important to understand how the problem has affected the body as a whole. This information is combined with information about the pregnancy, previous pregnancies and the general health of the mother and baby. Sometimes parents want only a partial autopsy done such as only on the heart. It is important that these wishes are discussed with the health care provider so they are recorded on the autopsy consent form. A partial autopsy will not provide the same level of information as a complete one.

### Why are there so many forms to fill out?

You will need to complete some or all of the following forms, required by law, depending on the circumstances of the death.

- 1. Registration of Stillbirth:** This form is required by law to record the places and causes of all stillbirths. This information helps us be alert to situations that may need investigation or areas for improved health care services. A section of this form is completed by the parent(s) and the remainder of the form is completed by the attending physician/coroner, and funeral director.

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- 2. Permission for autopsy:** A parent of the baby who died must sign a consent form before an autopsy can be done and will receive a copy of the signed consent form to keep. We would like parents to know that, in most circumstances, they can choose to refuse an autopsy [full or partial]. However, we hope that understanding the great benefits of an autopsy will help parents make the decision in favor of the post mortem examination. Some parents find it helpful to talk about the autopsy with their doctor, their religious advisor, a social worker or the pathologist who would be doing the examination. You are welcome to tell the doctor or any team member about any autopsy restrictions due to personal or cultural reasons. Some families request certain mementos such as special clothing to be left with the baby. The pathologist will willingly arrange this.
- 3. The Hospital Release Form:** This form allows the Funeral Director of the parent's choice to take responsibility for transporting and caring for the baby's body as requested.

### **How long does an autopsy take and when will I receive the results?**

A routine complete autopsy usually takes about 3 hours.

The pathologist sends a preliminary report to your family doctor a few days after the examination. Later, a final report of all completed studies is also sent. Your doctor will contact you to come in and review the results together. The autopsy pathologist is also available if you have further questions.

### **Will there be any visible marks from the autopsy?**

We want to assure parents that the body of their baby is treated with respect and dignity. Marks from the examination will not be visible when the baby is dressed. Face and hands are not involved in an autopsy. If you would like family or friends to view your child, you can feel comfortable arranging for this with the Funeral Director or Social Worker.

### **Will there be any extra cost for an autopsy?**

For residents of British Columbia the cost of autopsy examination is covered by their Provincial Medical Plan.

### **Do you have any more questions?**

If there are other questions or concerns, do not hesitate to ask your doctor or the nursing staff.

General autopsy information pamphlet is also available at:

[www.cw.bc.ca/library/pdf/pamphlets/CW020Autopsy\\_2015.pdf](http://www.cw.bc.ca/library/pdf/pamphlets/CW020Autopsy_2015.pdf)

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