

## A guide to the post mortem examination procedure for adults

Bereavement Support Office  
North Devon District Hospital  
Raleigh Park, Barnstaple, EX31 4JB  
Monday – Friday 8.30am – 4pm  
Tel: 01271 322404

### Other formats

If you need this information in another format such as audio CD, Braille, large print, high contrast, British Sign Language or translated into another language, please contact the PALS desk on 01271 314090 or at [ndht.pals@nhs.net](mailto:ndht.pals@nhs.net).

This leaflet explains why you are being asked to give your consent to a post mortem examination and outlines the procedure we will follow.

We would like to express our sympathy to you and your family following the loss of your loved one. We have asked you to read this booklet because a post mortem examination has been requested by you or by the hospital consultant.

We understand that it is a difficult time for you and that you may find it hard to take things in and to ask questions. This booklet contains a detailed account of post mortem procedures and how you can obtain information about the results of the examination afterwards. The details of a post mortem examination will also be explained to you verbally.

We hope that it will help you to understand the reasons for the examination and why we need to ask you to complete a form giving your consent.

You can choose how much information you want to receive on what will happen during a post mortem examination. However, there are certain things that we will need to discuss with you. The main things to remember are:

- A post mortem will only be carried out if you are in full agreement
- You do not have to give your consent if you do not wish to***
- You will have choices about the extent of the examination

During the discussion:

- You can ask as many questions as you wish
- You can take a break from filling in the consent form or stop at any time if you feel that you need to

We recommend that you bring someone with you for support, perhaps a family member or friend. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to speak to a member of staff. All staff are on hand to guide you through the process and answer any questions.

## **What is a post mortem?**

A post mortem is a detailed study of a body after death. It is also known as an autopsy. Post mortem examinations are carried out by pathologists – trained doctors who specialise in the diagnosis of disease after death and identifying the causes of death. They work to standards set by the Royal College of Pathologists and the Human Tissue Authority.

There are two types of post mortem:

Post mortem examination required by a Coroner: This is an investigation required by law and does not require the consent of the family.

Consented post mortem: This is an examination requested by yourself or by the consultant caring for your relative in order to find out more information about their illness and cause of death, or to advance medical research. **This can only be done with your full permission and you will have choices about the extent of the examination.**

This leaflet describes the process for the ‘Consented post mortem’.

## **Why are post mortems carried out?**

The medical examination of a body can be extremely useful in determining how and why someone has died, providing information about the effect of treatment given or the events leading up to death. They can also be useful to better understand how a disease has spread, or whether the person who died had a genetically inherited disease. Finding out more about an illness may help your family or help doctors treat patients in the future.

## **When and where does a post mortem take place?**

The examination usually takes place within a week of the death, and may be done here or at another hospital. We will advise you when and where the examination will take place. If you would like to see your relative prior to the examination, please inform the Bereavement Support Office or the person who is taking your consent for the procedure. We will do everything possible to arrange this for you. From time to time, professionals in training such as medical students, student nurses and police officers may view the post mortem as part of their training. If you have any strong objection to this, please let us know.

## **Giving your consent**

A hospital post mortem examination can only take place with your consent.

We will give you 24 hours to consider your decision about the post mortem examination after the consent form has been completed and you will be given details of someone to contact if you change your mind.

Sometimes the person may have given consent before they died. Where this is not the case a person close to them can give consent. In these circumstances the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death will usually have been issued before the post mortem examination, but the doctors who looked after the person before they died may request the examination to obtain more information.

## **What happens during a post mortem examination?**

The examination will be carried out in a post mortem examination room, rather like an operating theatre, which is licensed and inspected by the Human Tissue Authority.

During a standard post mortem examination the body is opened and organs are removed for examination. In some cases the cause of death is not immediately obvious and a diagnosis can only be made by retaining small tissue samples of relevant organs for more detailed examination. In rare cases the Pathologist may need to retain a whole organ for a full assessment to allow an accurate diagnosis of the cause of death to be made. When this happens the organ or tissue is normally sent to a specialist unit.

These full assessments often take weeks or even a few months to complete, depending on the extent of the investigations required. Once they are complete, the Pathologist will produce a report for the medical staff responsible for the care of the person before they died.

### **Tissue samples**

Small tissue samples which are needed for further examination are usually set into blocks made from paraffin wax. The wax blocks are sliced into very thin layers, which are about ten times thinner than a hair. These slices are placed onto glass slides and stained with a special dye to allow cells to be studied under a microscope.

### **Organs**

If whole organs or larger pieces of tissue are needed for more detailed examination they will normally be treated with a chemical that preserves them. Samples of the organ or tissue may then be processed into blocks and slides as described above. Organs which do not need to be kept are returned to the body.

## **What happens when the post mortem examination is complete?**

When the post mortem is complete you will be told whether tissue samples and organs have been examined. With your consent, the tissue blocks and slides may be stored as part of the record of the post mortem examination in case they are useful to you or your family in the future. The samples may also be useful for teaching, research, clinical audit or quality assurance. These samples can be a very valuable resource that helps answer important medical questions and improve patient care for others. **However, we must have your consent for them to be kept and used for these purposes.**

## Who can give consent?

The most important wishes to consider are those of the person who has died. If it is known that the person who has died gave consent or specifically did not want to give consent to the retention of tissue samples or organs, then those wishes must be respected.

If their wishes are not known, then a person nominated by them when they were alive, or someone in a relationship with them or closely related, must give consent. The Bereavement Support staff will advise you who is the most appropriate person to give consent, as defined by the Human Tissue Authority.

## The consent form

There are 4 sections, each one has choices for you to make. You will be asked to sign each section to confirm your understanding and consent.

The first page of the form is for your details and those of the person who has died. You will be asked to confirm that you have read this booklet, that you understand what is going to happen and that you have had all your questions answered.

### Part 1. Post mortem examination

You have a choice of a full or limited post mortem. A full post mortem means that the doctor can examine any part of the body. If you wish to limit the extent of the post mortem you can specify:

- The head and mouth cavity, including the brain
- The chest and neck
- The abdomen and pelvis
- Any other limitation you wish to specify

If you place a limit on the extent of the examination, this may restrict the information available. You need to discuss this with your doctor who will be able to advise you which option would be most appropriate.

You will then be asked what you would like the doctor to do with any small pieces of tissue which have been examined in the laboratory. You can indicate if you would like the tissue samples:

- Kept as part of the medical record so that they can be used for tests for you or your family in the future
- Used for education and training
- Used for research that has been approved by an ethics committee

If you **do not** want any tissue samples to be kept, you will be asked to choose whether you would like them returned to you or for the hospital to dispose of them.

## **Part 2. Retention of whole organs for more detailed examination**

If the doctor thinks that a more detailed examination of an organ or large piece of tissue would give useful information, they need consent from you for this. We will discuss the likelihood of this with you. You can:

- Agree to the retention of any organ
- Agree to only certain organs being retained, you can specify which one(s)
- Object to any organ being retained

**If you consent to organs being retained in this way, you then have to choose what should happen to them when the examination is complete:**

- The organs can be returned to the body. This will delay the funeral.
- You can donate the organs for education and training
- The hospital can lawfully dispose of them
- The organs can be returned to your funeral director. This will be after the funeral, so you would need to arrange a separate service for their disposal.

## **Part 3. Special requests, conditions or objections**

You can make any conditions or requests in this section, the pathologist will comply with whatever you write.

## **Part 4. Signatures**

You will be asked to sign again and give your contact details. The other people present will also sign and add their contact details. You will be given a copy of the form before you leave.

## **What if I change my mind?**

We fully understand that this is a difficult time for you and that things you were told during the consent process may be uncertain or unclear. We hope that this information leaflet will help to clarify things. However, if you do have further questions or are uncertain about anything that you have been told please do not hesitate in contacting us on **01271 322404**.

If you do change your mind and wish to withdraw or alter any part of the consent, please contact the Bereavement Support Office on **01271 322404**. If there is no-one available to take your call, please leave a message and we will call you back as soon as we can.

## **When will I know the results?**

It is very unusual for an obvious cause of death to be found on the day of the examination. Even when this does occur, there is usually a benefit in carrying out more detailed examinations of tissues in order to find out more information. The doctors will do their best to make a diagnosis as soon as possible but it could be up to three months before a full report is available. The results will be sent to the consultant who was looking after the person before they died and to their GP. We will contact you when the report is ready.

## Will I be able to see the body after the post mortem examination?

Yes, there is normally no reason why you cannot see them after the examination. They will be dressed in a hospital gown and it is unlikely that you will be able to tell that the examination has taken place. Please let the Bereavement Support staff know, and they will arrange this for you.

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### PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern, call 01271 314090 or email [ndht.pals@nhs.net](mailto:ndht.pals@nhs.net). You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

### Have your say

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust aims to provide high quality services. However, please tell us when something could be improved. If you have a comment or compliment about a service or treatment, please raise your comments with a member of staff or the PALS team in the first instance.

'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at [www.careopinion.org.uk](http://www.careopinion.org.uk).

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