



Advancing Excellence

Requesting Consent for Autopsy

Preparation:

- When possible, prepare your patient's family by offering the option of an autopsy as you discuss an imminent death. Offer an informative pamphlet describing the autopsy.

Requesting Consent:

- If you have not offered the option of autopsy prior to your patient's death, do so when you notify the family of the death:

I am _____, the doctor caring for your _____. I am sorry to have to tell you that he/she has died. His/her other doctors and I think that the cause of death was _____. It is your privilege to have an autopsy performed on your _____, if you choose. This is a service that the hospital provides, free of charge, to help us answer any questions that you or the doctors might have about his/her disease or the care he/she received.

It is important to help us learn more about [this disease] for the sake of patients in the future. The autopsy need not delay your funeral preparations, and even a complete autopsy will not disfigure the body, should you want a viewing.

Would you like us to perform an autopsy? (Offer a problem directed/limited autopsy if this is more acceptable).

Signing Consent:

- Is telephone consent legal at your hospital? Faxed consent or telegram?
- Help the family fill out the consent form completely, including the witness signature(s).
- Thank them and assure them that the autopsy will be useful to them, the hospital and to future patients.

Physician, Remember:

- That most families will give consent, if asked!
- That the patient's account and the family are not charged for the autopsy.
- That the autopsy is a careful medical/surgical examination, not the type of dissection in which you participated as a medical student.
- To try to make signing the consent easy (have the paperwork ready; offer alternate methods of consent like fax or phone, when available).

Who May Give Consent?

- Does the death fall under the Medical Examiner/Coroner's (ME/C) Jurisdiction? Contact the ME/C to confirm.
- Will the ME/C release the body to the hospital's pathologists if no medicolegal autopsy is to be performed?
- If the ME/C releases the body without an examination, the family should be offered a hospital autopsy.
- Consent for autopsy for non-ME/C's cases is granted by next-of-kin. (Check your hospital policy for your definition of "next-of-kin," or the person responsible for the body.)

The Value of Autopsy

For Families, Patients, and Society:

- Answers questions
- Assists in resolving grief and guilt
- Helps in settling insurance claims and in assigning death benefits
- Helps identify familial disorders
- Helps to ensure that the quality of medical diagnostics and care is high
- Helps to identify environmental/occupational health risks
- Helps to identify trends in infectious diseases
- Improves the accuracy of vital statistics

For Physicians and Hospitals:

- Answers questions
- Allows self-evaluation of treatment practices and efficacy of therapy
- Helps monitor quality of care
- Helps to evaluate new diagnostic and therapeutic methods
- Helps to provide medicolegal information

Important Phone Numbers

Decedent Affairs/Hospital Mortuary: _____

Medical Examiner/Coroner: _____

Pathology Department: _____