



King's College Hospital

NHS Foundation Trust

Bereavement support

Post-mortem explained: A Simple Guide



King's College Hospital
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We would like to offer you, your family and friends our sympathy at this time. We realise that the days and weeks to come may be difficult for you.

This booklet provides information about a post-mortem examination that may be carried out.

Please do not hesitate to ask any questions or raise any concerns. Our mortuary team will always be pleased to help you, please use the contact information at the bottom of this page.

King's College Hospital Bereavement Services
Telephone: 020 3299 3426
Email: kch-tr.kchbereavementservices@nhs.net

Contents

What is a port-mortem	2
Why a post-mortem necessary	3
Tissue samples and organs	3
Coroners and post-mortems	4
Giving consent for a post-mortem	5
The examination	6
Results of a post-mortem	7
Other supprt	8

Post-mortem explained: A Simple Guide

What is a post-mortem?

A post-mortem is the examination of a body after death. It's also known as an autopsy.

Post-mortems are carried out by pathologists. Pathologists are doctors who specialise in the diagnosis of disease and the identification of the cause of death.

Post-mortems are carried out for two reasons as outlined below.

- **If the death has been referred to the coroner** and the coroner feels that a post-mortem is necessary to determine the cause of death. A coroner is a judicial officer who is responsible for investigating deaths (particularly those that happen under unusual circumstances) and determining the cause of death. At the request of a hospital in order to provide information about an illness or cause of death, and to further medical research.

If a post-mortem is ordered by a coroner it must take place by law, whether the next of kin gives agreement or not.

If the post-mortem is requested by a hospital, the hospital must obtain written consent from deceased's next of kin or nominated representative.

Relatives of the deceased can also request that the hospital carry out a post-mortem in order to learn more about the reasons why a partner, or relative, died.

As part of a post-mortem carried out by a hospital, the pathologist may wish to take samples of human tissue or remove organs for further study and research. However, this can only be done if the next of kin gives consent.

Why a post-mortem is necessary

A post-mortem can provide important information about illness or causes of death.

Post-mortems also play an instrumental role in medical research because they can provide information about illness and health.

Tissue samples and organs

Information can be obtained just by looking at tissues or organs at a post-mortem. This will require removing small pieces of tissue for further study. After a post-mortem, any tissues or organs taken from the body can be returned. However, some investigations can take several weeks, and this may delay the funeral. As a result, you may wish to ask for the tissues or organs to be sensitively and respectfully disposed of to allow the body to be released for the funeral.

Alternatively, you may decide to allow any tissue samples or organs to be kept for further research purposes. The next of kin must give their consent to tissue or organs being removed and used for training, audit and research purposes.

Coroners and post-mortems

If the post-mortem has been requested by a coroner, and the pathologist decides that tissue samples are needed to establish the cause of death, consent from the next of kin is not required (although tissue and organs cannot be used for any other purpose without consent).

If the medical team does not know the cause of death, the coroner will be appointed to investigate.

A coroner is a special judge who investigates unnatural or violent deaths, where the cause of death is unknown, or because the death took place in prison, police custody or another type of state detention, such as a mental health hospital. The coroner's role is to find out who died and how, when, and where they died. For more information please visit A Guide to Coroner Services for Bereaved People (www.gov.uk)

**London Inner South Coroner
1 Tennis Street SE1 1YD
Tel: 020 7525 4200 (Option 1)
Open 8am-12 noon and 1pm-3pm
Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)
www.innersouthlondoncoroner.org.uk**

Giving consent for a post-mortem

The Human Tissue Act, the law that governs post-mortems, ranks relationships to the deceased in order of importance. Consent is obtained from the highest ranked existing relative on the list.

With the exception of a post-mortem requested by a coroner, the first step of a post-mortem is to obtain consent.

The ranking system that is used is listed below.

- Spouse or partner (this includes same-sex partnerships).
- Parent or child.
- Brother or sister.
- Grandparent or grandchild.
- Child of a brother or sister.
- Stepfather or stepmother.
- Half brother or half sister.
- Longstanding friend.

You do not have to give your consent for a hospital post-mortem, or you may decide you wish to limit the scope of the post-mortem.

You will also need to give consent on what happens to any tissue or organs removed from the body during the post-mortem. Your consent is not binding. You can give it one day, and then decide to withdraw it the next.

The examination

The pathologist is usually assisted by an Anatomical Pathology Technologist (APT) - a person who is specially trained to assist pathologists. Medical staff may also be present to observe the examination as part of their training. The pathologist does not need your consent for this, but if you are unhappy at the prospect, you should let them know. The pathologist will respect your wishes.

Pathologists perform their examination to standards set by the Royal College of Pathologists. One of the most important standards is that the examination must be carried out in a respectful manner and with full regard for the feelings of bereaved relatives.

The pathologist will make a careful examination of the body, and possibly take photographs, digital images and X-rays for more detailed study. These images are kept as part of the post-mortem record.

The internal part of the post-mortem then begins. Sometimes, it is possible to use an existing surgical incision for the examination. If not, an incision is made down the front of the body.

However, these openings are made discreetly, in places which are as least noticeable as possible. For example, if the brain needs to be removed, an incision is made behind the hair at the base of the head.

The pathologist will make every effort to avoid any physical signs of examination, although in some cases this is not always possible. The pathologist will remove the internal organs for detailed examination. If the pathologist feels that is necessary and you have given consent to the procedure, samples of tissue and possible whole organs will be placed in special chemicals to preserve them. They will then be used to determine the cause of death.

Following the examination, the remaining organs are then placed back into the body and the incision is closed. If you wish, it is possible to see the body of a partner or relative after the post-mortem.

Results of a post-mortem

A copy of the post-mortem report will be sent to your partner's or relative's GP, either by the hospital or the coroner's office. You can also arrange to discuss the findings of the post-mortem with the doctor in charge of your partner's or relative's care in hospital.

The results of the post-mortem should be available at that appointment. However, if the results are not going to be available, you will be notified by hospital staff not to expect the results. When you are meeting to discuss the results of a post-mortem, try not to feel rushed or pressured by time constraints. You may find it useful to draw up a list of the questions that you have before the meeting.

It can often be hard to absorb all the information and understand the implications of any issues that you may have. Do not worry if further questions occur to you after the meeting, as another meeting can be arranged to discuss them.

If a post-mortem has been ordered by the coroner, the report may be more limited. This is because its purpose is to identify the cause of death, rather than making a more detailed assessment. You should be able to obtain a copy of the report from the coroner's office, although there is usually a fee for this.

Other Support

At a Loss

Signposting the bereaved to support

W: www.ataloss.org

Cruse Bereavement Care

Free support service to the bereaved.

T: 0808 808 1677

W: www.cruse.org.uk

Support after Suicide Partnership

Resources for those bereaved by suicide and signposting to local support groups and organisations.

W: www.supportaftersuicide.org.uk

NOTES:

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. The PALS office is on the ground floor of the Hambleton Wing, near the main entrance on Bessemer Road - staff will be happy to direct you.

PALS at King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, London SE5 9RS

Tel: **020 3299 3601**

Email: kch-tr.palsdh@nhs.net

You can also contact us by using our online form at www.kch.nhs.uk/contact/pals

If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact PALS on **020 3299 1844**.

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