

The Autopsy can help answer a number of questions.



Why did my relative die?

Was there anything wrong with him/her that we didn't know about?

Did the doctors get it right?

Are there any problems that have implications for the rest of the family?

An autopsy may not provide all the answers, however many studies around the world have shown that useful information, previously unknown, is revealed in 20-30% of autopsies. This is despite all the technology, scans and tests that may have been done in life.

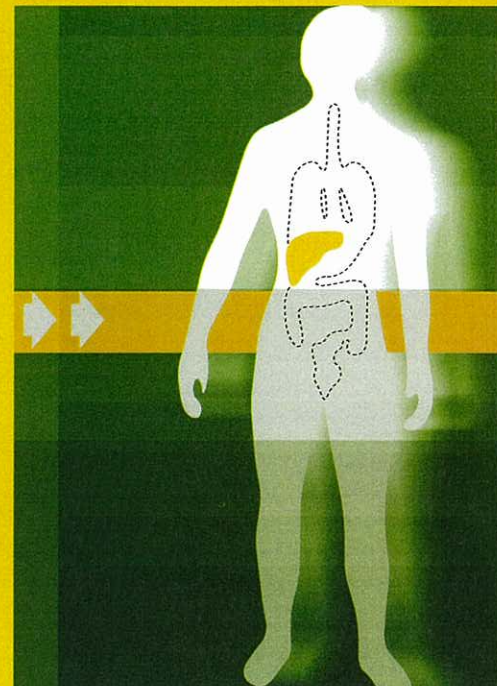
You may request that an autopsy be limited to examining only a particular area of the body, or that the autopsy material not be used for teaching or research. A limited autopsy may provide some information. However the pathologists will be better able to understand the cause of death and effects of any disease when a full autopsy is performed.

## Medicine is Pathology

For more information on autopsies we recommend you speak to your doctor.

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# About Autopsies



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## The Autopsy

Autopsy means "see for yourself". It is similar to a major surgical procedure but done by specially trained doctors, called pathologists.

The purpose of the autopsy is to learn about the person's health during life, and to determine the cause of death.

### Why are Autopsies Done?

Autopsies can be ordered for a number of reasons and may be either hospital or coronial autopsies.

#### Hospital (non-coronial autopsies)

These are usually requested by the hospital doctors to check to see whether any diseases were missed in life that could have been treated.

#### Coronial autopsies

These are ordered by a magistrate called the coroner, who by law has to investigate sudden unexpected and unnatural death.

In Australia, except for coronial autopsies, permission is required from the next of kin to carry out an autopsy. To give this informed consent the procedure must be explained adequately before any documents giving consent are signed. Codes of practice for autopsies may vary from state to state.

A death of a loved one is a time of tragedy for a family. Decisions can often be overwhelming. However, even when the law does not require it, information worth knowing is often uncovered in a hospital autopsy.

When a family member dies, you may ask the hospital to perform an autopsy. This is a free service. Autopsies are performed professionally, with respectful treatment of the dead.

The body is examined externally and internally. Organs are examined, with small samples taken to be looked at under a microscope. Other tissues, blood and fluid samples may also be taken to look for infections or diseases. The pathologist writes a full report on the findings.

The results can be discussed with the family by the doctor that cared for their relative and in some cases directly with the pathologist.

Knowing the results of an autopsy may help to clarify the accuracy of your relative's diagnosis, its gravity and measures taken to prevent the final outcome.



### The Importance of an Autopsy

Hospital autopsies have an important role in quality control. Often they show the diagnosis has been accurate, but sometimes conditions may be found which may not have been detected. As well as informing the family it also helps the medical, nursing and other healthcare professionals in their professional development.

An autopsy gives information about a disease and its effects on the body. From this, doctors, nurses, medical students, and researchers can learn about how diseases affect the body and about the effects of treatments. Through observing autopsies medical students see and learn about the conditions they will later be treating. Without knowledge garnered from the dead it is very difficult to care for the living.

The recent decline in the number of people allowing their family members to be investigated by an autopsy is jeopardising the future of research in a number of areas.

### After an Autopsy

There is little evidence an autopsy has taken place once the body is redressed and/or embalmed. Normal funeral arrangements can be organised (even an open casket). Usually an autopsy does not delay the funeral.

Most religions allow autopsies. Pathologists are happy to accommodate religious requirements. If you have a question, check with your religious or spiritual adviser.