



**F**or close relatives who suddenly lose a spouse, son, daughter, mother, father or another member of the family, the very thought of an autopsy may be hard to bear. However, there may be some comfort in the knowledge that an autopsy may help to determine the cause of death.

In many cases, this knowledge plays an important part in the process of recovering from an unexpected loss, and also aids the grieving process.

This leaflet tells you what happens when the Department of Forensic Medicine performs an autopsy.

DEPARTMENT OF FORENSIC MEDICINE  
FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES  
UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN  
FREDERIK V'S VEJ 11,  
DK-2100 COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

When an autopsy  
is required

Information for next-of-kin

## **WHO CAN ORDER AN AUTOPSY?**

In the initial forensic examination, when the external examination of the deceased is performed, the police work with the government medical officer or forensic pathologist to determine whether an autopsy should be carried out.

Before this examination, the police inform the next-of-kin that an autopsy may be required.

The next-of-kin can object to an autopsy. But if the police insist that an autopsy is required, the matter must be put before a court within 24 hours. Thereafter, a judge will decide whether the autopsy will be carried out or not.

The police may also request an autopsy on behalf of the National Board of Industrial Injuries, etc.

## **WHY IS AN AUTOPSY PERFORMED?**

The purpose of an autopsy is to determine the exact cause and circumstances of death.

An autopsy enables the forensic medical team to assess how any physical changes and lesions may have occurred. This helps to ascertain whether foul play was involved.

In the case of industrial injuries, the autopsy may determine whether compensation should be paid.

## **WHERE DOES THE PROCEDURE TAKE PLACE?**

Autopsies are carried out at:  
Department of Forensic Medicine  
Faculty of Health Sciences  
University of Copenhagen  
Frederik V's Vej 11,  
DK-2100 Copenhagen, Denmark

An autopsy usually commences the day after the external examination of the body. Once the autopsy is complete, the body may be released to the undertaker.

## **WHO PERFORMS THE AUTOPSY?**

A doctor and a forensic technician employed by the Department of Forensic Medicine will perform the autopsy.

## **WHAT HAPPENS DURING THE PROCEDURE?**

The body is given a CT scan to allow the doctor to form an impression of any diseases or injuries suffered by the deceased.

After the scan, the doctor performs an exterior examination of the body, looking for lesions or indicators of disease.

The doctor then examines the organs of the chest cavity, abdominal cavity and skull. If fractures or diseases are suspected, the skeleton is also examined. The major organs are removed from the body and are examined separately. The doctor obtains small tissue

samples from the organs for further investigation. The tissue will be kept at the department laboratory. Unless they are required for further examination, the internal organs are replaced in the body, which is then sewn up and made to look presentable.

Finally, the deceased is covered in a shroud. If relatives wish to do so, they may now say their goodbyes. Relatives need to make an arrangement with the forensic technician beforehand.

## **HOW DO RELATIVES OBTAIN THE RESULTS OF THE AUTOPSY?**

The autopsy report with the results of the post mortem is sent to the police district where the death occurred, and a copy is sent to the government medical officer. Relatives of the deceased do not receive a copy.

Relatives may contact the police or the government medical officer to hear what the autopsy revealed and to learn the cause of death.

They may also contact the Department of Forensic Medicine to talk to the doctor responsible for the autopsy.

## **WHAT IF THE POLICE DECIDE AN AUTOPSY IS NOT REQUIRED?**

In such cases no autopsy is performed. Once the death certificate has been completed, the undertaker may be contacted. From this point on, the undertaker may deal with all practical matters.