

Coroners Postmortem Examination Information for Relatives

Coroners Service for Northern Ireland

www.coronersni.gov.uk

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Introduction

This leaflet gives information on a Coroner's postmortem examination. You will have been given a copy of this leaflet because someone close to you has died and the Coroner, who has legal responsibility to investigate the death, has directed that a postmortem examination should be carried out. The information in this leaflet will help you to understand what is involved in the postmortem process and what your options are in relation to the retention of tissue samples or organs.

You may have further questions about the Coroner's investigation and there are a number of people who will be able to provide you with more information;

- Coroners Service Staff (including the Coroners Liaison Officer)
- Hospital Bereavement Staff
- Funeral Director.

Coroners Liaison Officer

Coroners Liaison Officers are members of staff of the Coroners Service. Their role is to help you with any questions you have about the Coroner's investigation and the postmortem examination. A Coroners Liaison Officer will be designated to you but if they are unavailable another officer will still be able to help you.

The Coroners Liaison Officer will contact you once the postmortem examination has been completed and will give you their name, contact details and preliminary information about the examination. You can contact them directly on the number they give you or through the Coroners Office on 028 9044 6800 or by e-mail at coronersoffice@courtsni.gov.uk.

Why a Coroner Directs a Postmortem Examination to be Carried Out

The law requires that in certain circumstances a death must be reported to a Coroner for investigation. The Coroner will usually be notified by a doctor or by the police, where a death appears to be:

- unexpected or unexplained;
- as a result of violence;
- an accident;
- as a result of negligence;
- due to industrial disease;
- or from any cause other than natural illness or disease.

Deaths must also be reported when:

- the cause of death is unknown;
- a doctor has not seen and treated the person for the fatal illness during the previous 28 days.

When a death is reported to the Coroner the police will be authorised to gather information to assist in the Coroner's investigation. The postmortem examination is a key stage in this investigation. The findings from a postmortem examination will help to establish the cause of death and whether any further action on the part of the Coroner or police is required.

The Coroner will decide if a postmortem examination should be carried out. The Coroner will direct the State Pathologist's Department or Hospital Pathology Department to carry it out. Most Coroners' postmortem examinations are carried out by the State Pathologist's Department at Belfast City Mortuary.

Identifying the body

You or another family member may be asked to formally identify the body of the deceased. This could either be to a police officer at the place where the death has happened or it could be later at the mortuary before the postmortem examination is carried out.

Representation at a Postmortem Examination

Members of the public are not permitted to attend a postmortem examination as it is a medical procedure,

however you may wish to be represented by a medical practitioner at the examination but this would be at your own expense.

Funeral Arrangements

If a death is reported to the Coroner you should not finalise funeral arrangements until the Coroner has authorised the release of the body for burial or cremation.

Once satisfied that the postmortem procedure is completed the Coroner will release the body and issue a burial or cremation order. Even if the Coroner is going to hold an inquest, the funeral can still take place as soon as the Coroner has released the body.

The Coroners Liaison Officer or the police will be able to confirm to you when the Coroner has released the body.

What is a Postmortem Examination?

A postmortem examination (also known as an autopsy) is an examination of the body following death. It is carried out by a pathologist, a doctor specialising in the study of disease and injury in the body and in determining the cause of death. The pathologist works to standards set by The Royal College of Pathologists.

The postmortem examination will start with an initial external examination of the body followed by an internal examination. The pathologist will need to remove and examine the major internal organs. In most cases the organs are returned to the body afterwards.

Although some information can be obtained from looking directly at organs in a postmortem examination, often the only way to understand properly what has happened is to look at part of an organ under the microscope, carry out special tests or obtain a second medical opinion. Occasionally it is necessary to retain whole organs for further examination, as this can provide more detailed understanding of the cause of death.

It is usually necessary to retain small tissue samples for further examination and for further tests such as looking at chromosomes or genes or to search for infections due to bacteria or viruses that may have caused a death. The samples of tissue taken for testing are usually retained in case they are needed to answer further questions about the cause of death.

Tissue Samples, Blocks and Slides

- Small **samples** of tissue are removed from the organs and placed in small plastic containers. The samples measure approximately 1.5 x 1.5 centimetres (smaller than a postage stamp) and are up to 5 millimetres thick.
- The tissue is chemically treated to remove water, which is replaced with wax. This process creates **tissue blocks**. Very thin slices (sections) a tenth of the thickness of a human hair are then cut from the surface.
- The sections are placed on glass **slides** so that they can be examined under a microscope. More than one slide can be cut from each block.
- These techniques are the same as those used to examine tissue from living patients.

The tissue blocks and slides are stored in special cabinets as part of the medical pathology records.

Residual Tissue

The process of creating tissue blocks and slides may create very small amounts of unused or residual tissue. This is usually disposed of by incineration.

X-Rays, Photographs and other Images

It may be necessary to x-ray or photograph the body or an organ during the postmortem examination. These images form part of the record of investigation of the death. They are usually retained indefinitely. Their use is strictly controlled and confidentiality is maintained at all times.

Seeing the body after the Postmortem Examination

The body will be prepared by the mortuary staff and then released to your undertaker who can make arrangements for you to view the body. Normally any incisions that have been made during the postmortem examination will not be visible. The funeral director will be able to tell you if there are any visible signs of the postmortem examination before you view the body.

The body is normally released immediately after the Coroner's postmortem examination. Exceptionally, usually in criminal cases, it may be necessary for the pathologist to retain the body for re-examination a few days later. If this is the case you will be given information about this – every effort will be made to release the body as quickly as possible.

The results of the Postmortem Examination

The pathologist will provide the preliminary results of the postmortem examination to the Coroner very quickly. The final written report may not be available for some considerable time because further tests may need to be carried out and these can take time to complete.

The Coroners Liaison Officer will contact you as soon as the preliminary results are available and will give these to you. They will also tell you about any organs or tissue that may have been retained following the postmortem examination.

When the final postmortem report is completed it will be sent to the Coroner who will forward a copy to the deceased's doctor. The next-of-kin will be informed when this happens and may also request a copy of the final report from the Coroner. The report may contain complex medical terminology, and you may wish to discuss the findings with your family doctor.

If you feel that you would like to discuss the postmortem examination with the pathologist who carried it out you should contact the Coroners Liaison Officer who will arrange this.

Death Certificates

On receipt of the final postmortem examination report, the Coroner will then consider if an inquest needs to be held.

If the Coroner decides that an inquest is not necessary the Registrar of Deaths will be notified and the death can then be registered and a Death Certificate issued.

If an inquest is to be held it will not be possible to register the death or have a Death Certificate issued until the inquest has been completed.

When registration of the death is delayed the Coroner can issue an interim certificate called "a Coroner's Certificate of Evidence of Death" to assist in the administration of the estate. However not all financial institutions will accept this and you may need to wait for the final registration of the death before the administration of the estate can be completed.

An Inquest

An inquest is not a trial; it is a public inquiry by a Coroner, sitting with or without a jury, into the circumstances

surrounding the death. The purpose of the inquest is to determine the identity of the person who has died, how, when and where they died, and to provide the details that the Registrar of Deaths requires to allow the death to be registered.

More information about the Coroner's inquest is available from the Coroners Service, Mays Chambers, 73 May Street, Belfast BT1 3JL. Telephone 028 9044 6800 or by e-mail at coronersoffice@courtsni.gov.uk

Retained Organs and Tissue

The pathologist, with the authority of the Coroner, may need to retain any organs and tissue samples removed at the postmortem examination to assist in the investigation into the death. Once the Coroner's investigation has finished, the Coroner will decide if these samples need to be retained or if they can be released.

The Coroners Liaison Officer will contact you and discuss the Coroner's decision and the options available to you. You will be asked to sign a form setting out what your wishes are if the Coroner agrees to release any organs or tissue samples.

Retained Organs - Further Use or Disposal

If the Coroner agrees to the release of retained organs you can choose:

- for the organs to be used in medical education, or research, or both;
- for the organs to be returned to you through your funeral director. It will be the family's responsibility to arrange a separate cremation or burial for these organs.
- for the Coroner to authorise disposal of the organs in a lawful and respectful way.

Tissue Blocks & Slides - Further Use or Disposal

The tissue blocks and slides will be stored by the State Pathologist's Department on behalf of the Coroner until the Coroner's investigation is completed and the Coroner decides that they no longer need to be retained.

The Royal College of Pathologists recommends that tissue blocks and slides form part of the medical pathology records and that they should be retained in case they need to be reviewed at a later time. If they are retained, access to them will be strictly controlled and they will not be used for any purpose without your permission.

If however you request the release of the tissue blocks and slides, and the Coroner agrees, you can choose:

- to give them for use in medical education, or research, or both. (You may wish only to give some of them for these purposes);
- for the tissue blocks and slides to be returned to you through your funeral director. It will be the family's responsibility to arrange a separate cremation or burial for these. This means it may not be possible to have the case fully reviewed or seek a second opinion at a later date.
- for the Coroner to authorise disposal of the tissue blocks and slides in a lawful and respectful way.

This leaflet is provided to give you information on a Coroner's postmortem examination but if you have further questions on this or on any of the work of the Coroner you should speak to the Coroners Liaison Officer or the staff in the Coroners Office.

Useful Contact Numbers

Coroners Office:

Telephone:	028 9044 6800
Fax:	028 9044 6801
E-mail:	coronersoffice@courtsni.gov.uk
Website:	www.coronersni.gov.uk
Belfast City Mortuary:	028 9079 4241

This leaflet is produced by the Northern Ireland Court Service in partnership with:

- The Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety
- The State Pathologist's Department



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For further information on the work of the Coroners Service for Northern Ireland please contact

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