

Autopsy

What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is done after a patient dies. In an autopsy, a doctor examines the body, using surgery (**incisions**). The doctor who does this has special training, and is called a **pathologist**. This doctor looks at the organs and cells, and learns about the medical history, disease, and cause of death. The doctor may look at the whole body, or just one organ or system. Small samples are taken. They may be looked at under a microscope. They may be tested for drugs, chemicals, or poisons. The doctor may also look at the genes, to see if a disease was passed from parent to child.

Why should we do an autopsy?

An autopsy helps us make sure we know everything we can about the child's illness. Sometimes, the family will be comforted when they learn that the diagnosis and treatment were correct. Knowing why the child died may help the family feel better.

An autopsy can show that the illness was caused by a germ that can spread, such as TB (**tuberculosis**). If a germ like this is found, family and friends can be treated before they get sick.

If the illness is passed on from parent to child, an autopsy can give us important information about the family and future children.

By looking at organs and cells, doctors and researchers may find causes of childhood diseases, such as cancer or heart problems. It may help the family feel better if they know the information the doctors get from the autopsy can help other children.

Information from autopsies also helps to educate medical students and doctors in training. It helps them become better doctors.

Who gives permission for an autopsy?

The next of kin must give permission for an autopsy. Permission may be given by signing a form. Parents may say only certain organs or sites may be examined. However, if the doctor does not have permission to examine the whole body, he or she may not get all the information that is needed.

Sometimes, the law may require an autopsy to find out the cause or manner of death. When the law says an autopsy must be done, permission of the next of kin is not needed.

Does the family pay for the autopsy?

The family does not pay for the autopsy. Families are not charged to move the body to and from the place where the autopsy is done.

Who does an autopsy?

Autopsies at Phoenix Children's Hospital are done by certified pediatric pathologists trained in doing the autopsy and understanding the autopsy studies. They respect the body, and the wishes of the family.

When is an autopsy done? How long does it take?

Usually an autopsy is done soon after death, on the same day or the next morning. It takes a few hours to do. The tests are done and results are



A doctor tells the family what the report said.

written when all the tests are done. This is called the **final autopsy report**.

Who receives the final autopsy report?

The final autopsy report is technical, written for the doctors who cared for the child. A doctor interprets and summarizes the results. That attending physician then tells the family what the report said.

Will we have to change funeral arrangements if we do an autopsy?

No. An autopsy does not change how the body looks. An autopsy does not prevent, delay, or complicate a funeral viewing of the body. Phoenix Children's Hospital works closely with your funeral home to help this go smoothly.

What happens if there is a consent for organ donation?

After the child has died, and before an autopsy is done, the child can donate organs. Organs that are donated are not studied in the autopsy.

What happens to organs and tissues after autopsy?

Organs and tissues that have been removed and tested during an autopsy are disposed of within one to three months after the autopsy is done. If the family wants all the organs to go with body to the funeral home, they need to say so in the written consent. However, if the doctor does not have permission to keep some parts to study, he or she may not get all the information that is needed.

In some cases, researchers who study certain diseases or treatments can learn from organs and tissues taken during an autopsy.

Now that you've read this

- Tell your nurse or doctor what information an autopsy can give us.
(Check when done.)



If you have any questions or concerns about the autopsy or organ and tissue donation, ask your doctor, nurse, or chaplain.

**If you want to know more about child health and illness,
visit our library at The Emily Center at Phoenix Children's Hospital
1919 East Thomas Road
Phoenix, AZ 85016
602-546-1400
866-933-6459
www.phoenixchildrens.com**

Disclaimer

The information provided at this site is intended to be general information, and is provided for educational purposes only. It is not intended to take the place of examination, treatment, or consultation with a physician. Phoenix Children's Hospital urges you to contact your physician with any questions you may have about a medical condition.

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#723 • Adapted by Paul S. Dickman, MD • Illustrated by Dennis Swain



The Emily Center

Autopsy

Diagnostic Test/Exam

Si usted desea esta información en español,
por favor pídasela a su enfermero o doctor.

Name of Health Care Provider: _____ Number: 723
For office use: Date returned: _____ db nb

Family Review of Handout

Health care providers: Please teach families with this handout.

Families: Please let us know what you think of this handout.

Would you say this handout is hard to read? Yes No

easy to read? Yes No

Please circle the parts of the handout that were hard to understand.

Would you say this handout is interesting to read? Yes No

Why or why not?

Would you do anything differently after reading
this handout? Yes No

If yes, what?

After reading this handout, do you have any
questions about the subject? Yes No

If yes, what?

Is there anything you don't like about the drawings?

Yes No

If yes, what?

What changes would you make in this handout to make it better or easier to understand?

Please return your review of this handout to your nurse or doctor or send it to the address below.

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Thank you for helping us!