

WHAT CAN I DO NEXT?

You may find that it helps to speak with

- your family;
- your doctor; or
- someone close to you.

This may help you decide if you would like to find out more information.

You can contact an information line to find out more. The numbers are on the back of this pamphlet.

The information line will ask you to provide some details to help them to follow up your questions. Details that will help include:

- full name of the person who died;
- their date of death;
- where you think the autopsy was performed;
- your relationship to the person; and
- what you would like to know.

If you ring the information line, the team will try to complete their investigations as soon as possible.

It is important that you are given the best, most accurate information available and this may take some time.

FOR FURTHER HELP

Please phone the information line in the state where the autopsy was performed:

ACT 02 62442870

NSW 1800 225822

NT 1800 300028

QLD 1800 449171

SA 08 81616550

TAS 1800 420101

VIC 1300 657050

WA 1300 135030

This information was prepared in response to recommendations from reports from the Australian Health Ethics Committee (AHEC) entitled "Organs retained at autopsy ethical and practical issues" and "Ethical and practical issues concerning Ashed Bones from the Commonwealth of Australia's Strontium 90 Program 1957-1978".



This pamphlet has been produced by the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council Sub-committee on Autopsy Practice as part of the National Communication Strategy.

DO YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT ORGANS OR BONE SAMPLES KEPT AT AN AUTOPSY PERFORMED IN THE PAST ON A FAMILY MEMBER?

Further information is also available at
www.dhs.sa.gov.au/autopsy-organs

Over the past few years there has been public concern about autopsies and tissue retention - particularly about organs that were kept after autopsy and used for teaching, research or testing. It has become clear that families have often been unaware that the autopsy procedure may involve organs being removed and not returned to the body.

In addition between 1957 and 1978 small samples of bone were taken during some autopsies to be tested because of concerns about the effects of above ground nuclear testing. Some organs and ashed bone samples still exist and can be traced.

These issues are now being addressed across Australia. Reports produced about past autopsy practices also suggest that families who have questions, particularly about whether organs were kept, should have that information if they want it. People have the right to choose to know or not to know details about an autopsy

This pamphlet tells you:

- some information about autopsies;
- what you may be able to find out about a specific autopsy; and
- where you can get further help.

In 2002, the new National Code of Ethical Autopsy Practice was launched. This says that families should have the opportunity to get as much of the available information as they would choose.

WHAT IS AN AUTOPSY?

An autopsy (also called a post-mortem examination) is a step-by-step inspection of the outside of the body and of the internal organs by a doctor called a pathologist, who is specially trained in this type of work.

The autopsy is carried out in a mortuary in a respectful manner. Once the autopsy is completed, the cuts are carefully closed but can be seen if the body is uncovered.

An autopsy can give valuable information about the illness and treatment. It may also help families and doctors to better understand the reason for illness and death.

WHY ARE AUTOPSIES PERFORMED IN AUSTRALIA?

There are two reasons for an autopsy in Australia.

- Hospital autopsy
The family may ask the doctor to arrange for an autopsy to be performed, or a doctor may ask the family for permission to carry out an autopsy to help find out why the person died.
A hospital autopsy can't be performed without the permission of the family or the person before they died.
- Coronial autopsy
Some deaths (e.g. where the cause of death is unknown or where the person has died of unnatural causes such as an accident or suicide) must be reported to the Coroner. The Coroner decides whether an autopsy is needed. The permission of the next of kin is not required for a coronial autopsy.

WHAT ORGANS OR SAMPLES MIGHT HAVE BEEN KEPT AFTER AN AUTOPSY?

Sometimes some body tissues and organs require special tests and the doctor may need to keep whole organs for a more detailed examination. In other autopsies, organs may have been kept for teaching or

research purposes. Whilst many of these would have since been destroyed, some still remain and may be able to be traced.

Ashed bone samples from some people who had an autopsy from the late 1950s to the late 1970s were used in a program looking at the effects of nuclear testing by measuring a substance called Strontium 90. Most of these samples were used up in the testing. However some samples still exist.

HOW CAN I GET FURTHER INFORMATION?

To obtain information about a past autopsy, you will need to be the senior available next-of-kin of the person who had the autopsy or someone acting on their behalf. Depending on the law in your state or territory other next-of-kin may be able to receive information.

The information you can get will depend on what records are still available. For deaths that occurred many years ago the information may be limited.

If records indicate that some organs or bone samples still exist you will be offered a choice whether the organs/samples should:

- be given to a funeral director for burial or cremation in accordance with the wishes of the family;
- continue to be kept for teaching health professionals/ research; or
- be disposed of by the institution holding them.

If you decide to make an inquiry, and the information found then shows there are still organs or samples held by the hospital, laboratory or medical school, these options will be discussed with you.