

Frequently Asked Questions

What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is a medical examination of a body after death. It is performed by a pathologist, a person specially trained in such procedures, and is usually assisted by a specially trained technician.

What is a pathologist?

Pathology is the branch of medicine which studies the causes of human disease. Pathologists are specialized doctors that examine tissues from the body in order to diagnose disease in patients.

What is a Forensic Pathologist?

Forensic Pathology is a subspecialty of pathology which studies disease and injury that is of interest to the law—injuries and diseases that cause sudden, unexpected, or violent death. *Forensic Pathologists* must know about healthy organs and effective treatments in order to determine how someone died. To become a Forensic Pathologist, a doctor must first become a pathologist, then receive special training and pass a certification exam. Commonly Forensic Pathologists perform postmortem examinations and autopsies in order to determine the cause of death of an individual.

What is a Medical Examiner?

In Connecticut, a medical examiner is a board-certified forensic pathologist who investigates and examines persons dying a sudden, unexpected, or violent death and then determines the cause and manner of death.

What is the difference between cause and manner of death?

The cause of death is the disease and/or injury responsible for the death. An example would be lung cancer or a stab wound. The manner of death depends upon the circumstances of death and the choices are: homicide, suicide, accidental, natural, therapeutic complication, or undetermined.

How do Forensic Pathologists perform autopsies?

The autopsy is done under the highest standards of medical professionalism, similar to what you would expect from an examination in a doctor's office or of surgery in an operating room. It includes two phases—investigation of the history/circumstances and the examination of the body both externally and internally.

During the *external* exam, the pathologist examines the outside of the body as it is received, looking for evidence of injury or disease. Photographs are taken for identification purposes and documentation.

During the *internal* exam, the body is opened with surgical-type incisions and the internal organs (including the brain and heart) are examined and dissected. In all autopsies, small samples of each organ are retained and preserved so that the pathologist can perform later testing if needed.

In rare instances, an entire organ, such as a brain or heart may be retained for further diagnostic tests. These diagnostic tests are conducted after release of the body to the Funeral Director. The autopsy report will state that this has been done.

Pathologists also remove samples of blood and other fluids/tissues for further studies such as toxicological testing to look for alcohol, drugs, or poisons. If a drug is suspected to have caused or contributed to death, the death certificate may not be finalized until the toxicology results are completed. This typically takes between 6-8 weeks. During this time, the body may be released to the funeral home with a "pending" death certificate.

Why does the death certificate say "Pending further studies"?

In some cases, additional testing (e.g., toxicology testing) or further investigation is required for death certification. In order not to delay funeral arrangements, the OCME will issue a "pending" death certificate. This allows the family to proceed with burial or cremation. The "pending" death certificate is a proof of death and may be used for certain estate issues. Some insurance companies may not issue death benefits without a final death certificate. In order to help expedite the payment of insurance benefits to the family, once the pending death certificate is finalized, the OCME can, at the request of the family, contact the insurance company with the result. The OCME cannot send them a copy of the new death certificate but may tell them the final cause and manner of death. Some insurance companies will accept this in place of the actual death certificate.

How does the autopsy affect a funeral and burial?

The Forensic Pathologists and technicians at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner are sensitive to needs and desires of Funeral Directors and their clients. For that reason, the staff takes these steps with respect to an autopsied body.

- Incisions are made in a way to allow for an open-casket funeral.
- The amount of tissue preserved and retained is small, usually less than one pound.
- Instances when an entire organ is retained are generally in 5-10% of all autopsies.
- Pathologists, specialists and laboratories indicate in their written report when tissue or a whole organ is retained.

After completing the autopsy, any material not retained for future examination is released with the body to the Funeral Director. A written autopsy report and Death Certificate are issued.

What happens to retained materials?

Retained tissue and whole organs are stored in preservative for three years, and then are destroyed in a crematorium dedicated to and designed especially for human tissue. Samples of blood and other fluids are destroyed one year after completion of the toxicology report. Information about retention and disposal is recorded in the toxicology report as well as in the autopsy report.

Sometimes, at the request of lawyers involved in lengthy legal proceedings, tissue is retained for a longer period of time. And on rare occasion families have asked that retained tissue be returned to the Funeral Director for burial. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner does everything in its power to comply with such requests.

What should you know about documents and autopsy reports?

The death certificate is not a complete document until the Funeral Director files it with the Registrar of Vital Statistics in the town in which the person was pronounced dead (called the town of death). The original document stays in the Registrar's office forever. The Funeral Director usually provides a copy for the family, but anyone may obtain copies directly from the Registrar's office in the town of death. Only the Registrar of Vital statistics may release a copy of the death certificate (the OCME cannot release a copy of the death certificate).

The death certificate is public information. In order to comply with the law, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner will release information on the death certificate to media requests.

The autopsy report remains with the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and is not public information. By law, it can only be obtained from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and is available only to specific people or institutions defined by regulations. Such parties include:

- Next of kin (or those with written permission)
- Lawyers working with either side in criminal or civil matters involving the death
- Physicians who cared for the deceased
- Insurance carriers
- Government agencies or servants who need the report to exercise their lawful duties, such as: federal, state and municipal police departments; OSHA; Child Protection agencies; regulatory agencies like the Office of the Child Advocate

There are two major exceptions:

- 1- Autopsy reports are accessible to the public via the Freedom of Information Commission (FOIC) if the person died while in custody of the State (usually at a prison or psychiatric facility).
- 2- If an autopsy report is admitted into evidence during a criminal or civil trial, it may be available to the public at large through the court.

Does the OCME charge for its services?

There is no charge to families for an autopsy. The OCME charges fees (which go to the State's general fund) for copies of OCME reports, civil testimony, and cremation certificates. The current fees are listed on our website.

How is the OCME involved with Cremations?

By law, the OCME must inquire into the death of all individuals to be cremated in Connecticut. This may include contacting the family, physician, and/or examining the body. There is a fee involved and the Funeral Director handles this process.



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