FACT SHEET 8

My loved one's body and things

THIRRILI

This fact sheet explains what happens to the body of your loved if a medical examination is required, what you can do if you object to a medical procedure happening, and when and who can get the body when the coroner is ready to release it.

What happens to the body?

- If the body requires medical examination, it will be transported to the state mortuary at Queen Elizabeth II Medical Centre in Perth.

Preliminary examination

- A doctor or pathologist will do a 'preliminary examination' which is not very invasive. This might include things like collecting fingerprints, looking inside at the teeth and inside the mouth. The internal organs are left alone.

Autopsy

- An autopsy is a type of medical procedure performed by a pathologist. It might also be referred to as a "post-mortem".
- An autopsy includes external and internal examinations using techniques like those used in surgical operations. The chest, abdomen and skull are examined, and some organs are examined. This may involve removing the organs.
- In some instances, a more detailed examination of an organ, like the brain or heart, might be necessary to establish the cause of death. If the pathologist thinks this needs to happen, they will require permission from the coroner to remove the organs and keep them for several weeks.

What can I do if I object to the autopsy?

- If the coroner believes an autopsy is needed to confirm the cause of death, the Coroner's Court will contact the senior next of kin. The senior next of kin has the right to object to an autopsy being performed. It is important to notify the Coroner's Court immediately if you want to object (for more information, see Fact Sheet 5:Next of Kin and the Coroner's Court:).
- Any objection to the autopsy must be made as soon as possible to the Office of the State Coroner by calling (08) 9425 2900 or to the Police Service's Coronial Investigation Unit by calling (08) 9267 5700.
- The coroner will take the concerns into account, but may still decide that an autopsy is required. This is likely to happen if the coroner believes there is a remaining suspicion surrounding the death.
- If the coroner notifies you that your objection has been refused, you can apply to the Supreme Court for an order preventing the autopsy. This application needs to be made within 48 hours of being notified by the coroner (for more information, see Fact Sheet 5: Next of Kin and the Coroner's Court)..

What is exhumation?

- If the body has already been buried and an autopsy is needed, the body may need to be removed from the ground or burial site. This is called exhumation.
- The State Coroner may authorise an exhumation when it is believed an autopsy will provide new evidence.
- If the State Coroner authorises an exhumation, they will give 2 working days' notice to the senior next of kin.
- The senior next of kin and any other person who received the notice of the exhumation may appeal to the Supreme Court against the decision of the State Coroner.

When can I get the body?

- The coroner will authorise the release of the body as soon as they can. The coroner will also issue a certificate authorising for the body to be release for burial or cremation.
- The senior next of kin will nominate a funeral director. The funeral director will arrange the burial, listening to the senior next of kin.
- Personal belongings (e.g. jewellery) may be removed by the police and given to the family at the place of death. Otherwise, in Perth, personal belongings are sometimes given to the funeral director to return to the family. In country areas belongings are usually collected by the family at the relevant police station.

What about a death certificate?

- If the death is subject to a coronial inquiry, the death will still be registered with the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. However, until the State Coroner completes their inquiry, the cause of death can't be stated on a death certificate. An "incomplete" death registration can be issued at this point.
- At the completion of their inquiry, the State Coroner will advise the Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages of the cause of death. A "complete" death certificate may then be issued to the funeral, or an eligible applicant can apply directly to the Registry or a Court for a death certificate.

This information was last updated in December 2024 and does not constitute legal advice.

More help

For more information about the coronial process in general from the Coroner's Court of Western Australia visit:

- https://www.coronerscourt.wa.gov.au/_files/When_A_Person_Dies_Suddenly.pdf
- https://www.coronerscourt.wa.gov.au/F/family_information.aspx