

# **SPOKANE COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE**

## **Statement of Policy, Procedure and Practice**

**Policy Title:**           **COMPLETE AUTOPSIES; PARTIAL AUTOPSIES; AND  
EXTERNAL EXAMINATIONS**

**Policy:**

Three types of body examinations are performed by the Medical Examiner's Office: external examination (only); complete autopsy; rarely "partial" autopsy.

The complete autopsy will be the primary type of examination performed at the Holy Family Hospital morgue facility. However, under certain circumstances, as defined below, partial autopsies and external examinations can be performed at the discretion of the Medical Examiner, if the criteria described below are met.

The Medical Examiner's Office will keep records of the numbers of complete, partial, and external examinations performed each calendar year. This information will be included as part of the annual report of the Medical Examiner's Office.

**Procedures and Practices:**

When examination is required, complete autopsies are performed by the Medical Examiner's Office, with the exceptions described below. Even if any given case meets the criteria described under the categories below, a complete autopsy can be performed at the discretion of the Medical Examiner under any circumstance.

**Criteria for External Examination (only):**

1. Age of decedents greater than 60 years. Age can be less than 60 years, only if the decedent has significant medical history (attending physician unavailable).
2. No evidence of significant injury either at the investigative scene or by examination of the Medical Examiner. The presence of a locked, secured residence (at the investigative scene) is helpful, but not a strict requirement.
3. The decedent has no known physician, or the decedent's physician is unavailable or unwilling to sign the death certificate.
4. The decedent has no known medical history or scene investigation features to suggest current use of illicit drugs, or excess use of medications. If medication counts are available, counts are appropriate to prescription date.

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5. If the body is decomposed, the above criterion apply; but in addition, there must be a means to satisfactorily identify the decedent. In the case of decomposed remains, the decedent must have been found in a locked or otherwise secured environment.
6. In circumstances where a decedent is transported to a local funeral home before it is realized the Medical Examiner will be responsible for the death certificate, an external examination may be performed by a Medical Examiner Death Investigator at the mortuary, and documented as a brief narrative entry in the database, and with digital photographs.

**Criteria for Partial Autopsy:**

1. "Head examination only" in elderly decedents to clarify the presence or lack of brain injury if:
  - a. The decedent is 60 years of age or older.
  - b. Found unresponsive or dead on the floor with a reasonable possibility of fall as opposed to "sudden death then fall."
  - c. Radiographic study (MRI, CT, etc.) was not performed or could not define whether a natural death or accident is more likely.
  - d. A head examination (only) will clarify cause of death.
  - e. "Head examination" (only) can be performed for other reasons not defined above, when warranted in the judgment of a forensic pathologist. The reason should be documented in the autopsy report.
2. Rarely the autopsy is partial as a "liver biopsy only". This occurs when the criteria for external examination above are also met, but where the scene investigation or examination suggests terminal liver disease. While an external examination could be performed in these cases, a liver biopsy is easily performed and can make certification of the cause of death more accurate for statistical purposes.

**Documentation:**

- In the "Summary of Case Findings and Opinion" portion of the autopsy, a notation will be made whenever the examination was limited to external examination, examination of the head, or liver biopsy. If a complete autopsy was performed, no specific denotation is required. Also the "Case Findings" form checkbox will be completed at the time of autopsy, describing the autopsy type.
- The Medical Examiner's Office will record on an annual basis the number of complete, partial, and external examinations performed. This will be included in the Medical Examiner's Office annual report.



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Sally Aiken, M.D. Date  
Medical Examiner

John D. Howard 8-16-2013  
John D. Howard, M.D. Date  
Medical Examiner

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Computer File Name: Complete, partial, and external autopsies