

# SPOKANE COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE

## Statement of Policy, Procedure and Practice

### Policy Title:      REQUESTS FOR AUTOPSIES

#### Policy:

There must be a sound *forensic* reason (general public concern/need) for an autopsy to be performed by the Medical Examiner with the expenditure of public funds. A request by a family member, physician, other individual, or other specific interest group for an autopsy examination is not a proper reason, in and of itself, for the Medical Examiner to assume jurisdiction and perform an autopsy in a given case of death. A proper reason for jurisdiction must be established before consideration of what type of postmortem examination, if any, is warranted. The Medical Examiner's Office is not a "free" autopsy service, nor just a pathology/morbid anatomy lab. Pathology/autopsy services are available to the community in the private sector.

The decision to perform an autopsy or not to perform an autopsy in a Medical Examiner Case is made exclusively by the Medical Examiner(s), based on what is known about the individual case, Washington State law defining jurisdiction, and according to the formal death investigation training and professional judgement of the Forensic Pathologists.

The only exceptions to the above are by specific court order(s) or in cases of an industrial death where the cause of death is unknown and the Department of Labor and Industries is investigating. If, in such a case, the Department of Labor and Industries requests in writing that an autopsy be performed, the Medical Examiner is compelled to do so under RCW 68.50.103. If this occurs, the Department of Labor and Industry shall bear the cost of such autopsy, and is entitled to case information and the autopsy report under RCW 68.50.105.

Autopsies are not automatically performed in all deaths wherein the Medical Examiner assumes jurisdiction. The autopsy is one of many important death investigation tools, not an endpoint. The Medical Examiners may give consideration to the *reason* that an autopsy is being requested by outside individuals or agencies when making the decision to autopsy or not.

Good lines of communication between investigators, the family of the deceased, physicians, and the Forensic Pathologists, need to be established early, within a time frame that would allow private arrangements for an autopsy to be made in cases where a forensic autopsy is not indicated.

## **Procedures and Practices:**

When a body is released from a scene directly to a funeral home, the investigator should inform the family themselves, or by way of the on-scene investigative agency, that a forensic autopsy is not indicated in the death of their family member and that no further examination by the Medical Examiner's Office will be performed.

When a family member, a physician, or other individual or group requests that an autopsy be done, the requesting person should be asked the specific reason(s) for the request. The fact that a request has been made and the reason(s) for the request are to be brought to the attention of the Medical Examiner (Forensic Pathologist) on call as soon as is feasible/reasonable. Information as to how the requesting person may be contacted is to be gathered and included in the investigator's report.

When a physician is contacted for medical information concerning the death of one of his/her patients, and the body was released from the scene (or hospital or nursing home) directly to a funeral home, the facts that the body was released to the funeral home and that no forensic autopsy is planned should be given to the physician. It should also be shared with the physician that the scene investigation indicated a natural death (or a case where injuries are such that no further examinations are indicated).

The Medical Examiners are available to discuss autopsies and policies and practices with individuals that have an interest in a particular case.

The person requesting an autopsy should be contacted soon after the decision to autopsy or not autopsy is made and informed of the decision and reasoning for the decision. The discussion of the case between the investigator and the Medical Examiner needs to include a clear indication as to who will contact the family member or the physician in a given case. This will allow arrangements to be made for an autopsy to be done privately when a forensic autopsy is not indicated.

The Medical Examiner's Office maintains a list of medical doctors who perform private autopsies. This list can be provided to interested parties, making clear that the office does not endorse or credential any of the listed physicians. Due to conflict of interest issues, the Spokane County Medical Examiners do not perform private consultative autopsies in any death that has been reported to the Medical Examiner's Office, even jurisdiction-released deaths.

## **References:**

- RCW 68.50.010      Jurisdiction over remains
- RCW 68.50.020      Notice to coroner – penalty

Requests for Autopsies

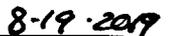
Page 3

- RCW 68.50.060 Bodies for instruction purposes
- RCW 68.50.070 Bodies, when may be used for dissection
- RCW 68.50.100 Dissection, when permitted
- RCW 68.50.103 Autopsies in industrial deaths
- RCW 68.50.104 Cost of autopsy

  
Sally Aiken, M.D.  
Medical Examiner

  
Date

  
John D. Howard, M.D.  
Medical Examiner

  
Date

**Implemented:** Mar 2002    **Revised:** April 2008; April 2010, June 2012; Sept 2013; August 2015; November 2017; August 2019

**Computer File Name:** Requests for autopsies