

Autopsy

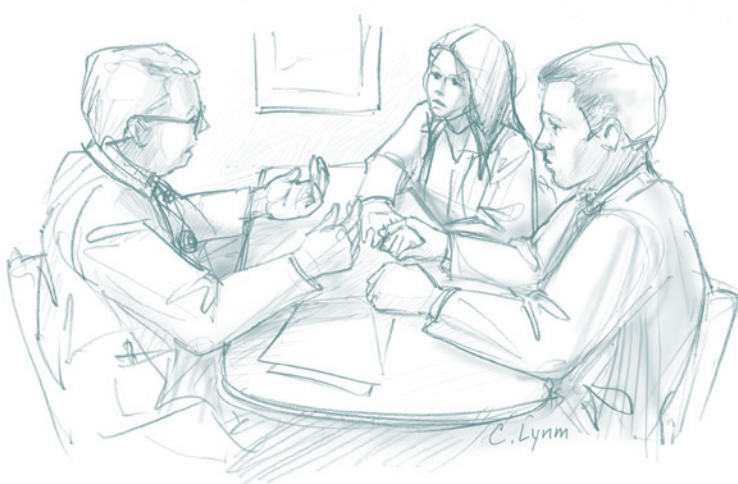
An **autopsy**, sometimes called a **postmortem** (after death) examination, is a thorough physical examination of the body after death to determine the cause of death and the presence of any other diseases. Autopsies are performed by physicians trained in **pathology**, the medical specialty that deals with the study of disease through the evaluation of tissues and body fluids. **Forensic autopsies**, which are required to investigate deaths resulting from violence or suspicious circumstances, are usually performed by a government coroner or medical examiner. The June 4, 2003, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about uncovering missed or incorrect diagnoses through autopsies.

AUTOPSY PROCEDURES

At the beginning of an autopsy, the exterior of the body is examined. Notes and photographs may be taken to document any important findings. The body may be x-rayed or scanned using **magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)** to look for problems like fractures or tumors. The doctor will then make **incisions** (cuts) in the body in order to remove and examine the internal organs. In some cases, the brain may be removed and examined. Small pieces of tissue may be collected for examination under a microscope to determine if there is any disease. Body fluids may be tested for the presence of any poisonous or harmful substances, a procedure known as **toxicology**.

AUTOPSY PERMISSIONS

When the cause of death is unknown, or if foul play is suspected in causing an individual's death, an autopsy may be required. Autopsies performed for these legal reasons do not require the consent of the family. When performed for medical reasons, autopsies require permission from family members or a legal guardian. It is important to know that performance of an autopsy need not affect timing of the funeral nor does it preclude an open casket. The incisions made during an autopsy are not visible to family members who view the body later.



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VALUE OF AUTOPSIES

Autopsies are the best way to determine the cause of death and can provide valuable information on why a person died. Information gathered during an autopsy can also help physicians better recognize disease in other patients. Because of this, autopsies are regarded as an important educational resource for doctors to learn about the most serious diseases—those that cause death.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Society for Clinical Pathology
800/621-4142
www.ascp.org
- College of American Pathologists
800/323-4040
www.cap.org

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Sources: College of American Pathologists, American Society for Clinical Pathology

