



Northern Ireland

**Courts and
Tribunals Service**

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Coroners Postmortem Examination

Information For Relatives

serving the community through
the administration of justice

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through the
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of justice

**This document can be made
available in a wide range of
alternative formats.**

**Requests should be made to
coronersoffice@courtsni.gov.uk**

Introduction

This leaflet gives information on a Coroner's investigation. You will have been given a copy of this leaflet because someone close to you has died and the Coroner, who has legal responsibility to investigate the death, has directed that a coronial investigation should be carried out.

The information in this leaflet will help you to understand what is involved in the postmortem process and what your options are in relation to the retention of tissue samples or organs and the Coroner's investigation.

You may have further questions about the Coroner's investigation - these people will be able to provide you with more information:

- Coroners Service Staff (including the Coroners Liaison Officer)
- Hospital Bereavement Staff
- Funeral Director

Coroners Liaison Officer

Coroners Liaison Officers are members of staff of the Coroners Service. Their role is to help you with any questions you have about the Coroners investigation and the postmortem examination. A Coroners Liaison Officer (CLO) will be assigned to you though if they are unavailable another officer will still be able to help you.

The Coroners Liaison Officer will phone you once the postmortem examination has been completed and will:

1. Give you their name and contact details;
2. Give you the preliminary finding of the examination;
3. Tell you if any tissue samples or organs were retained and what you can request to happen to them; and
4. Explain the process and stages in the Coroner's investigation.

You can contact the CLO directly on the number they give you or via the Coroners Service for Northern Ireland on 0300 200 7811 or by email at coronersliaisonofficer@courtsni.gov.uk

Why a Coroner Directs a Postmortem Examination to be Carried Out

The law requires that in certain circumstances a death must be reported to a Coroner for investigation. The Coroner will usually be notified by a doctor or by the police, where a death appears to be:

- unexpected or unexplained;
- as a result of violence;
- an accident;
- as a result of negligence;
- due to industrial disease;
- or from any cause other than natural illness or disease.

Deaths must also be reported when:

- the cause of death is unknown;
- a doctor has not seen and treated the person for the fatal illness during the previous 28 days.

The postmortem examination is a key stage in this investigation. The findings from a post-mortem examination will help to establish the cause of death and whether any further action on the part of the Coroner or police is required.

The Coroner will decide if a postmortem examination should be carried out. The Coroner will direct the State Pathology Department or Hospital Pathology Department to carry it out. Most Coroners' post-mortem examinations are carried out by the State Pathology Department at Northern Ireland Regional Forensic Mortuary.

If the doctor is unable to certify the cause of death, the police (PSNI) will arrange for the Coroners contracted funeral director to remove your loved one to their care until the Coroner has had the opportunity to consider whether a postmortem examination is required.

The role of the PSNI in a Coroner's Investigation

The PSNI are appointed as Coroners agents who will gather evidence on behalf of the Coroner. They, in consultation with the Coroner and State Pathology Department make the relevant arrangements for a postmortem examination

Identifying the body

You or another family member may be asked to formally identify the body of the deceased. This could either be to a police officer at the place where the death has happened or it could be later at the mortuary before the postmortem is carried out.

Representation at a Postmortem Examination

Members of the public are not permitted to attend a postmortem examination as it is a medical procedure, however you may wish to be represented by a medical practitioner at the examination though this would be at your own expense.

Funeral Arrangements

If a death is reported to the Coroner you should not finalise funeral arrangements until the Coroner has authorised the release of the body for burial or cremation.

Once satisfied that the postmortem procedure is completed the Coroner will release the body to a funeral director of your choice and issue a burial or cremation order on request. The family should not incur any additional expense for the removal of the body from the mortuary to the last known place of residence or funeral home in Northern Ireland. The Coroner will re-imburse the funeral director, on behalf of the family, a set fee.

Even if the Coroner is going to hold an Inquest, the funeral can still take place as soon as the Coroner has released the body.

The Coroners Liaison Officer or the PSNI will be able to confirm to you when the Coroner has released the body.

What is a Postmortem Examination?

A postmortem examination (also known as an autopsy) is an examination of the body following death. It is carried out by a Pathologist, (a doctor specialising in the study of disease and injury in the body and in determining the cause of death). The Pathologist works to standards set by The Royal College of Pathologists.

The postmortem examination will start with an initial external examination of the body followed by an internal examination. The Pathologist will need to remove and examine the major internal organs. In most cases the organs are returned to the body afterwards.

Although some information can be obtained from looking directly at organs in a postmortem examination, often the only way to understand properly what has happened is to look at part of an organ under the microscope, carry out special tests or obtain a second medical opinion. Occasionally it is necessary to retain whole organs for further examination, as this can provide more detailed understanding of the cause of death.

It is usually necessary to retain small tissue samples for further examination and for further tests such as looking at chromosomes or genes or to search for infections due to bacteria or viruses that may have caused a death. The samples of tissue taken for testing are usually retained in case they are needed to answer further questions about the cause of death.

Tissue Samples, Blocks and Slides

- Small samples of tissue are removed from the organs and placed in small plastic containers. The samples measure approximately 1.5 x 1.5 centimetres (smaller than a postage stamp) and are up to 5 millimetres thick.
- The tissue is chemically treated to remove water, which is replaced with wax. This process creates tissue blocks. Very thin slices (sections) a tenth of the thickness of a human hair are then cut from the surface.
- The sections are placed on glass slides so that they can be examined under a microscope. More than one slide can be cut from each block.
- These techniques are the same as those used to examine tissue from living patients.

The tissue blocks and slides are stored in special cabinets as part of the medical pathology records.

Residual Tissue

The process of creating tissue blocks and slides may create very small amounts of unused or residual tissue. This is usually disposed of respectfully by incineration.

X-Rays, Photographs and other Images

It may be necessary to x-ray or photograph the body or an organ during the postmortem examination. These images form part of the record of investigation of the death. They are usually retained indefinitely. Their use is strictly controlled and confidentiality is maintained at all times.

Viewing the body after the Postmortem Examination

The body will be prepared by the mortuary staff and then released to your Funeral Director who can make arrangements for you to view the body. Normally any incisions that have been made during the postmortem examination will not be visible. The Funeral Director will be able to tell you if there are any visible signs of the postmortem examination before you view the body.

The body is normally released immediately after the postmortem examination. Exceptionally, usually in criminal cases, it may be necessary for the Pathologist to retain the body for re-examination a few days later. If this is the case you will be given information about this – every effort will be made to release the body as quickly as possible.

The results of the Postmortem Examination

The Pathologist will provide the preliminary results of the postmortem examination to the Coroner very quickly. The final written report may not be available for some considerable time because further tests may need to be carried out and these can take time to complete (approximately three to five months).

The Coroners Liaison Officer will contact you as soon as the preliminary results are available and will give these to you. They will also tell you about any organs or tissue that may have been retained following the postmortem examination.

When the final postmortem report is completed it will be sent to the Coroner who will forward a copy to the deceased's doctor. The next-of-kin will be informed when this happens and may also request a copy of the final report from the Coroner. The report may contain complex medical terminology, and you may wish to discuss the findings with your family doctor.

If you would like to discuss the post-mortem examination with the Pathologist who carried it out you should contact the Coroners Liaison Officer who will see if this is possible.

Death Certificates

On receipt of the final postmortem examination report, the Coroner will then consider if an Inquest needs to be held.

If the Coroner decides that an Inquest is not necessary the Registrar of Deaths will be notified by the Coroner and the death can then be registered and a Death Certificate issued.

If an inquest is to be held it will not be possible to register the death or have a Death Certificate issued until the Inquest has been completed.

When registration of the death is delayed the Coroner can issue an interim certificate called “a Coroner’s Certificate of Evidence of Death” to assist in the administration of the estate. However not all financial institutions will accept this and you may need to wait for the final registration of the death before the administration of the estate can be completed.

An Inquest

An Inquest is not a trial; it is a public inquiry by a Coroner, sitting with or without a jury, into the circumstances surrounding the death. The purpose of the Inquest is to determine the identity of the person who has died, how, when and where they died, and to provide the details that the Registrar of Deaths requires to allow the death to be registered.

It is not the role of the Coroner to apportion blame or fault with regard to medical care and the Coroner’s findings following an Inquest are not to be confused with a verdict of medical negligence which can only be made by a civil court.

If you wish to make a complaint about the medical care your loved one received, please contact the relevant hospital Trust directly. Please send a copy of your complaint to the Coroners Service for information during the course of the investigation. If you need help with your complaint you can contact Patient and Client Council who will assist you at complaints.pcc@hscni.net or telephone 0800 917 0222.

Retained Organs and Tissue

The Pathologist, with the authority of the Coroner, may need to retain any organs and tissue samples removed at the postmortem examination to assist in the investigation into the death. Once the Coroner's investigation has finished, the Coroner will decide if these samples need to be retained or if they can be released.

The Coroners Liaison Officer will contact you and discuss the Coroner's decision and the options available to you.

Retained Organs - Further Use or Disposal

If the Coroner agrees to the release of retained organs you can choose:

- For the organs to be returned to you through your funeral director. It will be the family's responsibility to arrange a separate cremation or burial for these organs. There may be an additional charge for this service.
- For the Coroner to authorise disposal of the organs in a lawful and respectful way by the Pathologist.
- Occasionally you may be asked if the organ can be used for teaching and research.

Tissue Blocks & Slides - Further Use or Disposal

The tissue blocks and slides will be stored by the Pathologist on behalf of the Coroner until the Coroner's investigation is completed and the Coroner decides that they no longer need to be retained. Samples may also be retained under Police Powers if a crime is suspected.

The Royal College of Pathologists recommends that tissue blocks and slides form part of the medical pathology records and that they should be retained in case they need to be reviewed at a later time. If they are retained, access to them will be strictly controlled and they will not be used for any purpose without your permission.

If however you request the release of the tissue blocks and slides, and the Coroner agrees, you can choose:

- for the blocks, slides, and samples for genetic testing to be retained for future use i.e. the wellbeing of future persons (including family members), education and training of health care professionals and, if suitable, research approved by an ethics committee;
- for the tissue blocks and slides to be returned to you through your Funeral Director. It will be the family's responsibility to arrange a separate cremation or burial for these. This means it may not be possible to have the case fully reviewed or seek a second opinion at a later date. If family choice is collection of organs/tissues by a Funeral Director and this does not take place within 3 months of contact the hospital will inform the CLO who will clarify arrangements with the family; and
- for the Coroner to authorise disposal of the tissue blocks and slides in a lawful and respectful way by the Pathologist.

Transport

The Coroners Service is close to Central Railway Station and Laganside bus station at Donegall Quay which is one of the two city centre terminals for Ulsterbus. The other is in Glengall Street. At the moment, there is no link between the two terminals. There is a taxi rank at the City Hall. There is a car park located on Oxford Street.

For information about bus and rail timetables contact Translink on 028 9066 6630 or www.translink.co.uk.

Car Parking

There is public car parking located close to Laganside House eg Donegall Quay but there is some limited on-street parking. However there are a number of car parks nearby e.g. Donegall Quay, Montgomery Street or Hilton Hotel. Average daily charges are about £7 to £10.

For Help and Counselling

There are a number of organisations that will be able to support you during this time of bereavement. The main groups are listed below and they will have contact details for other groups that may be specific for your needs.

Cruse Bereavement Care

028 90 792419

Remember our Child

028 9079 7975

Samaritans

116 123

Victim Support Northern Ireland

028 9024 4039

Family Trauma Centre

028 9020 4700

Other useful contacts

Citizens' Advice Bureau

028 9023 1120

Social Security Agency – Benefit Enquiry Line

Freephone 0800 220 674

Age UK

0808 808 7575

This leaflet is provided to give you information on a Coroner's postmortem examination but if you have further questions on this or on any of the work of the Coroner you should speak to the Coroners Liaison Officer or the staff in the Coroners Office.

Useful Contact Numbers

For further information on the work of the Coroners Service for Northern Ireland please contact

Coroners Service for Northern Ireland
Laganside House
23-27 Oxford Street
Belfast BT1 3LA
Tel: 0300 200 7811
Email: coronersoffice@courtsni.gov.uk

This leaflet is produced by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service in partnership with:

- The Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety
- The State Pathologist's Department

If you require any further information about the NI Courts and Tribunals Service, please visit our website at

www.justice-ni.gov.uk/courts-and-tribunals