

NHS Education for Scotland

Transcript of Discussing Adult Authorised (Hospital) Post Mortem Examination Video Script

Introduction

Discussing post mortem examination with those who have recently been bereaved can be challenging and upsetting, both for the bereaved and for the professional. Be prepared and consider why it may be beneficial to perform a post mortem. Allow time before broaching the subject. It may be hard to fully engage the family in the early stages of their loss.

Think about what questions may be asked, what answers you can give, and from whom you may need support. Reassure the family that post mortems are carried out in a clinical and caring manner. You may feel nervous, thinking that relatives will refuse on the grounds of their cultural, faith or spiritual beliefs. Avoid basing what you do on any preconceptions or assumptions.

Why should we consider a post mortem?

An authorised hospital post mortem is performed primarily to establish the cause of a natural death, occurring in primary or secondary care, where the cause of death is uncertain. Authorisation is usually sought from the deceased's nearest relative or other nominated individual. In many cases the results of a post mortem will explain exactly what caused the individual to die. This may be relevant to the current and future health of their family, and others, and may also help with the grieving process. In a small percentage of cases, the results may not reveal the cause of death, but may still yield helpful information.

What is involved?

A post mortem can be invasive, partially invasive, or non-invasive. Check with your local pathology service which options are available in your area, *before* talking to the family. An invasive post mortem may produce the most complete diagnostic picture. Further investigations may include: histology, microbiology, biochemistry, virology and genetic testing. Discussion around genetic and DNA investigations can be particularly challenging. Your local pathology team may be able to support you.

What about the body?

Relatives might worry about what happens to the organs after a post mortem. Whole organs cannot be retained after the body has been released to the family, without specific authorisation. Explain that in the vast majority of cases, all organs will be returned to the

body before the post mortem is complete. After an invasive post mortem, the body may have incisions on the back of the head, the midline of the body and on the sides of the neck. These should not be easily visible once the body has been prepared and dressed.

What about organ donation?

An authorised post mortem can still be performed after organ donation. However, a body can either be bequeathed for anatomical dissection or post mortem – it cannot be used for both.

What if I change my mind?

Even if a family has signed the authorisation form, they can change their mind at any stage before the post mortem. If the relatives disagree about the decision, there are specific rules that apply.

When will I have the results?

The pathologist will provide the preliminary report within 2 days, unless the deceased wished their medical information to remain confidential. A final report will be available within a few weeks. This will be sent to the doctor who had been caring for the person during their last illness and a duplicate will also be sent to their GP. It's important that you can tell the relatives where they can get the results. They may wish to discuss the report with a medical practitioner, and may ask to have a copy. Clear language should be used to communicate the findings.

Can I arrange the funeral?

Reassure the family that the post mortem should not delay the issuing of the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death, or the date of the funeral.

Conclusion

It is important that you are prepared to discuss post mortem examinations. The information which they can provide may have value, both to those who are bereaved and to the health of future generations.

The film was produced in March 2016 and can be found at www.sad.scot.nhs.uk or <https://vimeo.com/167887527>

For more information visit www.sad.scot.nhs.uk or contact supportarounddeath@nes.scot.nhs.uk