



PRIVATE AUTOPSIES

A GUIDE FOR FAMILIES

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The loss of a loved one is difficult at any time, but doubly so when families have questions about how their relative died. Medical examiner's and coroner's offices have specific criteria that govern which cases they accept for investigation and autopsy; if the circumstances of your loved one's death don't meet those criteria, one possibility for closure is hiring a pathologist to perform a private autopsy. The private autopsy industry is almost completely unregulated and there is little public information available about how to retain a private pathologist or what to expect once you do so. Here are some things you should know before you pursue having one performed.

TIMING

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FINDING A PATHOLOGIST

Before you contract with a private pathologist, double-check that your loved one's death has been reported to the local medical examiner's or coroner's office and that they have officially declined jurisdiction. Simply call the office that governs the county or city in which your loved one died and ask to speak to an investigator.

There are currently 400-500 board-certified forensic pathologists in the country, but only a tiny fraction of them accept private work. To find a pathologist, call your local coroner's or medical examiner's office; they may be able to recommend a practitioner. Your funeral home may have the names of pathologists they can recommend and have worked with in the past. The National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) also maintains an online list of pathologists that perform private autopsies.

To ensure the pathologist you're speaking to is licensed to practice medicine in your state, input their name into the state medical board verification website (google "medical license verification" and your state for a link).



To determine if a pathologist is certified in anatomic and forensic pathology, enter their name in this database:

<https://www.certificationmatters.org/find-my-doctor/>

Note that board certification in forensic pathology is sequential; a physician must pass the anatomic pathology board examination to even be eligible to sit for the forensic pathology exam.

When you speak to a pathologist or their representative, have your loved one's information handy – date of birth, date of death, age, and specifics of their medical and surgical history. The pathologist may ask you to obtain the decedent's medical records before the autopsy; to do so, contact the medical records department of the hospital or the decedent's physician. You should have a clear idea of what specific questions you want the autopsy to answer and communicate them to the pathologist, so that she can determine what kind of post-mortem examination would be helpful. Keep in mind that while an autopsy can answer many questions, there are some issues that cannot be addressed via post-mortem examination – a careful, in-depth conversation with the pathologist will make clear what is and is not discoverable through post-mortem examination.

Many families request toxicological analysis as part of the post-mortem examination. However, there isn't a single panel of tests that will reveal what drugs were present at the time of death. You need to be specific about what you suspect so that the pathologist can evaluate your suspicions in the context of the case, collect the appropriate specimens, and give you an estimate of the price of testing.

If you are able, it's worth calling and speaking to several pathologists until you find one that you are comfortable communicating and working with.

PRICE

A private autopsy is likely to cost between \$2500 and \$10,000, depending on the completeness and complexity of the examination, location, and market. If you are requesting services like neuropathology (examination of the decedent's brain by a specialty pathologist) or toxicology (analysis of body fluids to detect drug and alcohol levels), those additional fees will be passed on to the family. Private autopsies are generally performed at the funeral home or at a local morgue; both may require a fee to lease and use the space that will be factored into the price. One way to reduce the price of the autopsy is to request a partial examination; if you're interested in finding out the degree of heart disease that your loved one



suffered from, a chest-only examination is cheaper, less invasive, and will answer your questions.

The pathologist will almost certainly require full payment up front in the form of a cashier's check from the bank, a check from the funeral home or attorney, a money order, or cash (anything but a personal check). The pathologist will also likely ask you to fill out an autopsy permit form that they will provide for you that documents your permission for the examination and clearly outlines the parameters of the autopsy (full or partial examination, consent to collect fluids for analysis, etc.)

The pathologist may also require that the permit be notarized and signed by the decedent's legal next of kin – a legal spouse, adult child, either parent, adult brother or sister, and guardian, in order of priority.

After the autopsy is completed, families should expect a brief phone call from the pathologist or their representative to discuss preliminary findings.

THE AUTOPSY REPORT

Once the post-mortem examination is complete, the pathologist will record her findings, wait for additional information (toxicology, neuropathology, histology), and generate a final report. The report is provided to the party that paid for the autopsy in hard copy and by tracked mail and will likely include a return receipt that should be signed and returned to the practitioner for their records. Following receipt, the pathologist should make themselves available for a discussion by phone to address any questions the family or their legal representative might have. The report might be ready anywhere from a few days to several months after the autopsy, depending on the complexity of the case and the amount of auxiliary testing requested by the family.

The autopsy report may be accompanied by a jump drive or CD of autopsy images, microscopic tissue slides, and/or tissue samples that are fixed in formaldehyde and mounted in blocks of paraffin wax. The tissue samples are shelf-stable. Alternately, you can ask the pathologist, in writing, to dispose of the tissue blocks if you do not wish to receive them.



MISCELLANEOUS INFORMATION

Autopsy techniques are specifically designed to allow a family to have an open casket and viewing even if a full post-mortem examination has been performed.

Occasionally, a family will request a second examination on a body that has already undergone a full autopsy at the medical examiner's office. Families should be aware that second autopsies very rarely reveal new, helpful information, and many pathologists decline to perform them.

It's important to keep in mind that medical malpractice claims are hard to prove; simply because your loved one had a poor outcome does not necessarily mean that their care was negligent. Speaking with an attorney before pursuing a private autopsy to support possible litigation is a critical step.

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