

that we only do the tests to which you have agreed. We do not want to give you more information that you feel you can manage at this time.

Occasionally, a forensic pathologist may also be involved. This is an expert in deaths from accidents and other unnatural causes.

### Coroner's post mortem

Sometimes after a death it is not possible for the doctor to issue a certificate because the cause of death is unknown. In some circumstances, such as an accident, an investigation is required by law. If this happens the death is referred to the Coroner (a lawyer who investigates unknown or unexpected deaths) who can then order a post mortem examination to be done. This is called a 'Coroner's post mortem'. You cannot legally refuse a Coroner's post mortem examination, but if you have objections these will be noted.

### Results of the post mortem examination

If you have given consent for the examination of your child, the doctor who looked after him or her will offer you an appointment to come back to the hospital and talk through the results – usually 6-8 weeks after the death. Often, whilst preliminary results of the post mortem are known within a few days, the need to examine certain samples means that the complete results of many post mortems are not available for longer. Some specialised

tests can take weeks or months. If the examination was ordered by the Coroner, the Coroner's Officer will give you the cause of your child's death when this is available. You may also wish to make an appointment with the doctor who cared for your child to receive a more detailed explanation.

### For more information, please contact:

Name: .....

Telephone/pager: .....

Position: .....

### Useful numbers

- RBH switchboard Tel: 0118 322 5111
- RBH Bereavement Services  
Tel: 0118 322 7059
- Child-Death Helpline Tel: 0800 282 986
- Child Bereavement Trust  
Tel: 01494 446648

Visit our website [www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk](http://www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk)

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

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Royal Berkshire  
NHS Foundation Trust

# A simple guide to the post mortem examination for babies and children

Information for families

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We are very sorry that your child has died. We understand that talking about any practical arrangements and then remembering what has been said may be very difficult at this time. Therefore, we have written this leaflet to give a brief explanation of why you may be told that your child is to have a post mortem examination or why the doctors or midwives may ask your permission for a post mortem examination to be carried out.

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The information applies to babies who have been born prematurely and who have died either before or after birth, as well as older babies and children.

Please do ask the person who gave you this leaflet or the staff caring for you, questions about the post mortem. We have also written a more detailed leaflet *Information for families of babies and children consenting to a hospital interest post mortem examination* and you are welcome to ask for a copy of this.

Please contact the person named on the back of this leaflet if you have any questions or wish to discuss things further.

### What is a post mortem examination?

A post mortem examination is sometimes called an autopsy. It is exactly the same procedure whichever name is used.

All post mortem examinations are carried

out as soon as possible after the death, usually within two or three days. It may be possible to arrange things more quickly if this is essential to enable a funeral to take place. Post mortem examinations are carried out by specialist doctors called pathologists who are assisted by technical staff. Most examinations on babies and children requested from this hospital are done at Oxford where there are two pathologists who are specialists in the examination of children.

A post mortem examination involves both an external and internal examination of the deceased. Usually all the main organs inside the body are examined. This includes the brain and the organs in the chest and abdomen but it may be possible to examine just some of the organs, such as the heart and lungs. However, if parents choose to limit the organs examined, some information will not be available in the final report. The person explaining the post mortem will explain this to you in more detail.

Sometimes x-rays, scans and photographs are also needed to help discover what was wrong or to be part of the record of the examination.

It is necessary for small samples to be taken from the organs and made into a laboratory slide so that it can be looked at under a microscope. The slides made contain a very small sliver of the organ and can be kept as part of your child's medical record, or returned to you for burial. It is very important that you feel you are able to

ask any questions you have about this at any time.

### Genetic testing

Genetic testing usually involves small samples of skin and or placenta for karyotyping (testing for genetic abnormalities in the chromosomes). These tests can sometimes be carried out without a post mortem, if genetic testing is the only information required by parents or doctors to reach or confirm a diagnosis.

### A post mortem with parental consent

If a doctor knows what has caused your child's death, s/he is able to issue a certificate, but it may still be helpful to understand more about the illness which affected your child. This is called a 'hospital or medical interest, voluntary or consented post mortem', and you will be asked to sign a consent form before the examination can take place. You can refuse to give consent or ask for the examination to be restricted. Please ask the person who gave you this leaflet for more information.

Carrying out post mortem examinations can also aid the training of medical students and specialist doctors, help with the discovery of new diseases and treatments, and confirm that treatment given to your child was correct. The person who explains the consent form to you knows that some of the questions may be very difficult for you to think about. The reason for the questions on the form is so