

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 child's 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 child's 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 6-12 weeks after your child's 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
- RBH Bereavement Midwives  
Tel: 07500 123 912
- Child Death Helpline Tel: 0800 282 986
- Child Bereavement UK  
Tel: 0800 02 888 40

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.

Maternity Unit  
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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 the doctors or midwives may ask your permission for a post mortem examination to be carried out or why you may be told that your child is to have a post mortem examination.

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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 also have a more detailed leaflet from SANDS 'Understanding why your baby died' and you are welcome to access this online at [www.sands.org.uk/sites/default/files/Sands%20-%20Understanding%20why%20your%20baby%20died.pdf](http://www.sands.org.uk/sites/default/files/Sands%20-%20Understanding%20why%20your%20baby%20died.pdf) or ask a member of staff 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 a child has died, 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, assisted by specialist staff. Most post mortems requested by this hospital are done at Oxford, where there are two pathologists who specialise in child post mortems.

A post mortem examination involves both an external and internal examination of the child. Usually all the main organs inside the child 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 decide 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 the placenta (occasionally skin if unable to obtain from 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 that we only do the tests to which you have agreed.