

SECTION 19 - CULTURAL/RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES

I. INTRODUCTION

Alabama is a multicultural society made up of many different ethnic, racial, and religious groups from around the world; this is particularly true in more urban areas. Each of these groups has their own cultural traditions and customs related to death which can be in conflict with the work of C/DC. Therefore to best serve families from these communities it is important the C/DC have an understanding of the cultural diversity present in their jurisdiction and anticipate concerns family members may have regarding the handling of a body, delay of burial and attitudes concerning autopsy.

Individual attitudes towards autopsy vary within and between religious and cultural beliefs. Religious and cultural beliefs are often stated as reasons for opposing an autopsy; however, most major religions are accepting of autopsies, in particular those required by law. Early in the investigation the C/MDI should speak with family members to determine if they have any cultural or religious rituals or customs surrounding death or specific objections to the investigation or autopsy. Prior to an autopsy being performed, the pathologist must be made aware if the family has questions, special requests, or oppose autopsy. In some cases the pathologist may be able to make some accommodations to meet all or part of a family's request. It is important to explain to the family why certain requests cannot be met. At all times families should be treated with respect and compassion.

Reassure the family that the performance of the autopsy will not mutilate the body or prevent an open casket service from being conducted. In many cases the family will withdraw their objection to the autopsy after they have heard an explanation for the necessity of the autopsy to answer questions for the protection of the public's health, for the purposes of the criminal justice and legal systems, and for the family who may not realize they have questions until days, weeks, or even years later.

If a family persists in refusing autopsy, consult ALDFS. When an autopsy is warranted, but not performed due to the religious or cultural beliefs of the family, document the refusal, including the name and contact information of the person objecting, their reasons for doing so, and the information they have received from law enforcement and/or ME personnel regarding the potential consequences. Make sure the investigating law enforcement agency and/or DA is aware of, and in agreeance with, the decision of ALDFS's office.

In some communities in Alabama, people may live their entire lives without contact with a healthcare provider and be buried without the use of a funeral director. In such situations, it is the responsibility of the county coroner to complete and sign the death certificate. If such ethnic or religious communities are present in your jurisdiction, it is prudent to work with religious or community leaders to create policies that accommodate their cultural traditions while allowing the C/DC to fulfill his or her legal responsibilities.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS:

The following is not intended as an exhaustive listing or absolute authority, but simply as a guide for the C/DC. Each case must be considered individually.

Christianity: Catholics and most Protestant churches, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Christian Scientists, do not forbid the performance of an autopsy.

Judaism: Orthodox and Conservative branches may object to an autopsy and may follow strict requirements to have the body buried within a short time frame. If an autopsy is allowed, specialized techniques may be required. Often Reform and Reconstructionist sects will allow an autopsy if they see it as an opportunity to help save another life either by organ or tissue donation or because of the opportunity the autopsy provides for learning. However, this may vary greatly even within the same sect, therefore is always best to speak directly with the family and make an attempt to accommodate their specific wishes.

Islam: The practice of performing an autopsy is not automatically forbidden in Islam. The Islamic principle of consideration of human welfare justifies autopsies in most cases. Specific rituals of which the C/DC should be aware include:

- The eyes and mouth are to be closed and the limbs straightened;
- The deceased should be buried as quickly as possible; and
- The clothing should be removed by a person of the same gender.

Amish and Mennonite: The Amish and Mennonite communities do not forbid the performance of an autopsy, but may request the body be returned to the family as quickly as possible. Most will allow transport of the body in a motorized vehicle.

Jehovah's Witnesses: Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the soul dies with the body, but may object to autopsy based on the belief that the body as a creation of God should not be disturbed.

Buddhism: Autopsy is not forbidden by Buddhists.

Hinduism: After death, the limbs should be straightened and the eyes closed. Religious jewelry or sacred threads should not be removed from the body. Autopsies are not forbidden.