

Charleston County Coroner's Office Policy #25

Title: Hospital Death Investigations

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Authorized By: Bobbi Jo O'Neal, Coroner

25.1 POLICY

The sworn personnel of the Charleston County Coroner's Office will investigate all hospital deaths that are reported to the office if the death occurred less than 24 hours after admission or invasive procedure; was unexpected; unexplained; suspicious, or related to violence or trauma. A Deputy Coroner must respond to the hospital facility following notification of any non-natural emergency room death. It is at the discretion of the Deputy Coroner whether to respond to a natural death that occurred in a hospital. This decision will be based on the information obtained during initial interviews with healthcare providers, emergency medical providers, and/or law enforcement personnel.

25.2 HOSPITAL RESPONSE

Following the notification by hospital staff of a death related to violence, trauma, or any other cases that require further investigation no matter the admission date/time prior to death, the Deputy Coroner will contact the investigating law enforcement agency to ensure that they have been notified of the death and to determine whether an investigation has been initiated at the scene of injury. In cases where the scene of injury remains intact, the investigating Deputy Coroner, based on case information will determine whether to respond to the hospital or scene first. At the hospital, the Deputy shall identify the decedent in accordance with the Decedent Identification Policy, examine and photograph the remains; review records; interview hospital and emergency personnel if available, and

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interview family members who may be present. The Deputy Coroner must make contact with the decedent's next of kin in person at the hospital if they are present. If they are not present, they must be contacted in accordance with the Notification of Next-of-Kin Policy. All personal, demographic, medical, and circumstantial information pertaining to a hospital death must be recorded by the Deputy Coroner in his/her field report which is kept in the case record.

25.3 REPORTABLE DEATHS/LESS THAN 24 HOURS

Upon notification of a death that occurred in an emergency department or death that occurred during the first twenty-four hours of admission and the death is a natural death, and the decedent has an extensive medical history, a primary care physician, and a physician who is willing to sign the death certificate, and the legal next of kin has been notified, the Deputy shall create a case number and make a proper record of the case in the records management system. Responding to the hospital is at the discretion of the Deputy.

25.4 AUTOPSY AND POSTMORTEM EXAMINATION

The Deputy Coroner must consider a hospital patient's age, medical history, and circumstances surrounding their death to determine the need for an autopsy or postmortem exam. If an autopsy or postmortem exam is warranted, the Deputy Coroner must arrange for transportation of the body to the autopsy facility, and notify the appropriate person to schedule the autopsy either in-house or the contracted autopsy service.

25.5 ORGAN AND TISSUE PROCUREMENT FOR DONATION

1. It is the policy of the Charleston County Coroner's Office to facilitate organ and tissue donation in cases provided the donation will not negatively affect the quality of the forensic examination or the ability to determine the cause and manner of death.

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2. Donor requests will come from We are Sharing Hope SC. (SHSC) via an email/text alert to the assigned Deputy Coroner.
3. SHSC will provide the following information:
 - a. Incident location to confirm jurisdiction.
 - b. Decedent's name.
 - c. Law enforcement agency if known.
 - d. Current location of the decedent.
 - e. Life status. Brain death or Donation after circulatory death (DCD).
 - f. A brief synopsis of the case.
 - g. A brief description of any known injuries or medical problems.
 - h. The requested organs and/or tissue.
4. The Deputy Coroner in consultation with a supervisor will consider available information and decide:
 - a. If more information is needed.
 - b. The request is reasonable, and all requested organs and tissues may be recovered prior to autopsy, or
 - c. Some of the requested organs and tissues may be recovered, but that the recovery of other organs or tissues may compromise the forensic examination, or
 - d. Tissues or organs may be recovered post-autopsy since it would compromise the forensic examination.
5. In deciding whether to release organs or tissues prior to autopsy, each individual case should be carefully considered as to whether recovery of any or all of the requested organs or tissues would eliminate or obscure findings vital to the determination of the cause, manner, or circumstance of the death.

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6. In all hospital-related coroner cases, the Charleston County Coroner's Office will make the final determination whether to allow procurement or not. All organ procurement cases will be approved by a supervisor prior to donation.

25.6 TOXICOLOGY

The investigating Deputy Coroner must ensure that appropriate toxicological specimens are obtained in the event of a hospital death. Blood and urine samples to be used for toxicological testing must reflect the patient's condition prior to emergency transport or at the time of incident or injury. It is necessary to obtain those bodily fluids drawn by hospital staff closest to the patient's admission time and prior to blood transfusion or drug infusion. Specimens are usually available for patients who live for a period following admission. The Deputy Coroner should ask the hospital staff member reporting the death whether any fluids were drawn upon or near admission time. Most hospital laboratories only retain patient's fluid samples for a limited time and therefore it is necessary for the Deputy Coroner to request that the hospital staff hold available specimens for retrieval under subpoena within a few days.

25.7 PERSONAL PROPERTY OF THE DECEASED

Hospital staff normally assumes custody of the personal property of patients. Certain situations may require the Deputy Coroner to take custody of personal items for investigative reasons or to facilitate the transfer of property to next of kin. All property taken by Charleston County Coroner's Office personnel shall be handled in accordance with the Property and Evidence Control Policy.

25.8 FOLLOW-UP

It is the responsibility of the investigating Deputy Coroner to contact the next of kin to advise them of the "cause" and "manner" of death if that is not available at the time of notification and answer any questions they may have.

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25.9 RELEASE OF BODY

The Deputy must contact the funeral home or cremation service chosen by the next-of-kin as well as appropriate hospital staff or morgue personnel to release the body. The hospital will complete the BRT.