

Autopsy

Policy:

Autopsies will be performed by a Board-certified Forensic Pathologist for the Skagit County Coroner's Office when it is necessary to determine or confirm the cause of death, document injury, or when required by state law. If a Board-certified Forensic Pathologist is unavailable to perform an autopsy at the facility, the Skagit County Coroner's Office will transport the case to a NAME. or IACME accredited facility for autopsy services.

The Board-certified Forensic Pathologist shall be licensed to practice medicine in Washington State and this shall be verified annually by Skagit County. The Board-certified Forensic Pathologist will sign a contract with Skagit County regarding services and fees. The Coroner's Office shall have at least 2 contracted Board-certified Forensic Pathologists.

The Board-Certified Forensic Pathologist shall be responsible to perform each postmortem examination, the diagnosis made, the opinions formed, and any subsequent opinion testimony.

Washington state law gives the Coroner authority to decide if an autopsy is necessary to determine the most likely cause of death. **Not every death will require an autopsy**, however, each case requiring coroner involvement will undergo a comprehensive investigation. It is important to realize that autopsies do not always provide a definitive cause of death.

An autopsy can assist in the following:

- Confirm or determine the identity of the deceased.
- Identify injuries and diseases that may have contributed to the death.
- Determine the effect of medical treatment on the deceased.
- Assist in the evaluation of the manner of the death.
- Re-assure care takers that their action or inaction did not contribute to the death.
- Maintain public confidence in relation to deaths that occur in custody.

An autopsy should be considered in the following cases:

- Sudden death of an apparent healthy person with no known or significant medical history
- Violent or suspicious circumstances
- Potential drug overdose or drug-related deaths
- Accidental deaths including Traffic or recreational-related deaths
- Suicides
- Deaths in which there are abuse or neglect concerns by another (includes past history with APS or CPS)
- Infant or child deaths
- Work-related injury deaths
- In-custody deaths
- The cause and manner of death cannot be established without an autopsy

The investigator will make sure all photographs, demographic information, and a detailed report or summary involving the circumstances of death be made available to the Forensic Pathologist prior to autopsy.

Autopsy cont.

Complete Autopsy: is defined to include a detailed external examination of the entire body, and an internal examination to include the removal and dissection of all thoraco-abdominal and neck organs, opening the head with the removal and examination of the brain. These are performed by a board-certified forensic pathologist. The forensic pathologist will examine all external aspects of the body prior to dissection. All autopsy ex-situ dissections shall be performed by the forensic pathologist.

All pathology assistants, autopsy technicians, dieners, or others without medical training, shall work in the presence of and under the direct supervision of a board-certified forensic pathologist.

Autopsy reports are to be completed on every autopsy case.

Autopsy reports should be clear, concise, and easily interpretable by other medical professionals.

Autopsy reports shall provide a cause and manner of death.

Digital photographs shall be used to further document significant injuries.

Specimens should be retained for toxicological and histological examination during autopsies.

Histological examination is at the discretion of the board-certified forensic pathologist performing the autopsy. Not every case will have histology or slides prepared for further examination.

Autopsies are completed in accordance with the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) Autopsy Standards.

External examination: is defined as a detailed description of the decedent's remains including scars, surgical incisions, medical devices, tattoos, etc. No internal cuts are made on the body and no organs are examined.

External examination forms are to be completed on every external examination case (see form)

Both body diagrams and photographs (digital) shall be used to further document significant injuries

Partial autopsy: is defined as an examination that forgoes any part of the defined complete autopsy, e.g. not opening any of the body cavities or not examining organs or examining in situ.

Example:

- a. A decedent with a significant medical history who sustained a significant fall and did not undergo diagnostic imaging to establish the presence or absence of suspected intracranial trauma.
- b. A decedent with an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound of head in which the projectile would need to be recovered from within the cranium.