AUTOPSY GUIDELINES

Purpose:
To establish guidelines for the performance of an autopsy and to monitor the efficacy of medicine, surgery or other treatment the patient received.

Policy:
A. The Department of Pathology shall perform an autopsy when requested by a physician and properly authorized by the legal custodian of the body.

B. GENERAL AUTOPSY GUIDELINES

1. Medical staff shall attempt to obtain an autopsy in all deaths meeting at least the following indications:
   a. Cause of death is not documented in the chart (Cause of death is not known with certainty on clinical grounds).
   b. Patient expired within 48 hours of surgical procedure (or other invasive procedure).
   c. Patient expired on a general care floor and was not a “no code” or did not have a terminal condition.
   d. All obstetric and perinatal deaths (up to 6 weeks after delivery).
   e. All neonatal and pediatric deaths (up to 18 years of age). Exception: non-viable infants who are admitted to the Nursery for comfort care only.
   f. Stillbirths (pathologist will determine the need for an autopsy based on clinical information).
   g. Cases meeting the definition of a coroner’s case but for which the coroner has elected not to perform an autopsy. (See Hospital Policy 7.6.1 for clarification of Coroner’s Case).

2. Permission: In general, the right to grant permission for the autopsy rests with the following persons IN THE ORDER NAMED:
   a. Judicially appointed curator, if one has been appointed.
   b. Spouse (legal divorce voids any rights over deceased; common law spouses are not recognized in Louisiana).
   c. Any child of legal age (18 years old).
   d. Any parent regardless of age.
   e. Any brother or sister of legal age (18 years old).
   f. Any relative by blood or marriage who assumes the right to control the disposition of the remains.
   g. Any person who assumes control of the remains.
   h. In the event a deceased person has no surviving legal next of kin as defined in (1) through (7) above, the person who is legally empowered to make burial arrangements for the deceased may authorize an autopsy.
3. Permission for an autopsy shall be obtained by the attending staff physician or house officer. When the next of kin is present, a written approval shall be obtained. The physician shall ensure that the form “Authorization for Autopsy” (SN 1061) is COMPLETELY and CORRECTLY filled out. In addition, the person granting permission MUST also sign a funeral home release to prevent delay of the autopsy.

4. The Nurse Manager or Charge Nurse shall be responsible for reviewing the form for completeness and accuracy, especially for next of kin. Once completed, the form will be sent to the Admitting Department by the Nursing Manager or Charge Nurse. If any part of the form is incomplete, it shall be that nurse’s responsibility to contact the physician to complete the form, and to inform him/her that the autopsy cannot be initiated until the form is completed. If there are difficulties in getting the form completed, the Nurse Manager, Nursing Director or Administrative House Manager shall be contacted for assistance.

5. In the event an incomplete or incorrect autopsy request form is received in Pathology, the following procedure will be utilized:

   a. The Pathology resident or faculty member handling the case will contact the requesting physician or the contact person for that area listed on the Patient Care Services directory; this individual will be informed that the autopsy cannot be completed until the paperwork is corrected. An Incomplete Return Form will be attached to the request, indicating the problem(s).

   b. The paperwork shall be forwarded to the Morgue Desk in Admitting, where it will be picked up by the responsible party, completed/corrected and returned.

   c. The Morgue Desk will notify Pathology when the autopsy paperwork has been returned.

   d. Pathology will pick up the Autopsy request and verify accuracy and completeness.

6. When the person authorized to grant permission for autopsy is not present, witnessed telephone consent may be obtained. Such consent is secured by the attending physician or house officer who telephones the legal next of kin, with a second staff person participating on an extension line, requesting the next of kin’s permission to perform the autopsy. The conversation shall require the person called to:

   a. Identify himself/herself orally.
   b. Affirm his or her relationship to the deceased.
   c. Give his/her approval of the procedure.
   d. Indicate any restrictions that are to be made.

7. Restrictions shall be written and signed by the physician as well as the staff person who witnessed and/or participated in the conversation. The staff physician or house officer should also obtain the funeral home release orally at the time the autopsy approval is sought. (Refer to Hospital Policy 5.16.1 Informed Consent).

Reference: LA Medical Consent Law, Revised Statute 40:1299.50 et seq.
C. The legal custodian of the body may request an autopsy be performed if the physician does not order one. The custodian must submit the request in writing before the autopsy will be performed. Each case shall be reviewed by a Pathologist, who may decline to perform the autopsy. Information regarding the cost of the autopsy, and expected time of completion can be obtained by contacting the Pathology Department during normal business hours. Autopsy requests are not considered emergent and typically are performed Monday through Friday.

Approved by Clinical Board: 5/15/01, 8/17/04, 8/21/07, 4/20/10, 6/18/13
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