Hospital autopsy examinations for stillborn babies

What is a hospital autopsy?
A hospital autopsy is an examination of your baby’s body to understand more about why they died. A hospital autopsy can also find abnormalities which you may not see when looking at your baby.

Why give consent for an autopsy?
The most important reason for a hospital autopsy after your baby is stillborn is to help understand the reasons why they died. Hospital autopsies may provide:

- information about problems which led to the death of your baby
- information that may be important for your health or for any future pregnancies
- medical knowledge that could help other families

Do you have to give consent?
Unless the autopsy has been ordered by the Coroner (in rare circumstances), it is your choice whether your baby has an autopsy or not. Before the autopsy is done, your health care provider must have your informed consent. Being informed about the procedure involves:

- knowing all your options
- having the opportunity to ask questions and have your questions answered
- understanding the reasons for the autopsy
- knowing what will be done during the autopsy in as much detail as you want and/or need
- having time to talk to others about your decision
- knowing how your baby will look after the procedure

How long can you take to decide about an autopsy for your baby?
There is no specific timeframe for making this decision. The pathologist can get better information if the autopsy is done as soon as possible after your baby’s death.

Who does the autopsy?
A pathologist usually does the autopsy. A pathologist is a doctor who studies and diagnoses diseases by examining organs, tissues and body fluids.

Where will the autopsy occur?
Only certain hospitals in Queensland have the facilities for baby autopsies. Your baby may be transferred to a different hospital for the autopsy. You may like to ask your health care provider where the autopsy will be done and how long your baby will be at that hospital. After the autopsy, your baby will be transferred back to the hospital where you gave birth.

What happens during an autopsy?
At all times your baby is handled with care and respect.

The procedures carried out during an autopsy will depend on the age of your baby, your medical and pregnancy history, and the circumstances of your baby’s death. Procedures may be limited to the outside of the body (an ‘external examination’) or may also include the inside of the body (an ‘internal examination’ of organs, tissues and body fluids). Autopsies can also be referred to as limited or full autopsies.

What is a limited autopsy?
A limited autopsy is when only some areas or organs of your baby’s body are examined. For example, only the chest area or only the outside of the body is examined. A limited autopsy does not provide as much information as a full autopsy as it is focused only on a selected area.

What is a full autopsy?
A full autopsy involves both an external and internal examination. A full autopsy provides more information about the whole body.

What procedures are involved in an external examination?
The pathologist may do some or all of these tests:

- swabs of the baby’s ear, throat and skin
- blood samples from the umbilical cord and baby
- examination of the placenta and umbilical cord
- X-rays and MRI scans
- external photographs
- skin samples for chromosome testing
What procedures are involved in an internal examination?
An autopsy is similar to a surgical operation. An internal examination involves a cut in the baby's body. The pathologist will close this using either stitches or surgical glue. The cut is usually made from the lowest part of the neck to the pubic bone. There may also be a cut on the back of the baby’s head if the brain is to be examined. The cut is made so that when sutured, the baby’s clothing will cover it.

During an internal examination organs are examined and replaced after small tissue samples are taken. These tissue samples are small, up to two centimetres across and three millimetres in thickness, and are used for examining the cells under a microscope.

Sometimes the pathologists will ask parents if they can remove larger portions or whole organs from their baby’s body for examination. Larger portions or whole organs will only be removed if you give consent. In some cases, the pathologist can take samples from inside the body without making a cut by using a needle.

Who decides what type of autopsy is done?
Your health care provider may recommend a certain type of autopsy and will speak with you about this. The kind of information you may get from an internal, external, limited or full autopsy will be discussed with you. If you have concerns about the autopsy relating to your religious beliefs, your health care provider can speak with you about how these will be respected.

How long will the samples be stored?
The tissue samples and organs taken in the autopsy will be stored according to legal requirements. This is usually between 20 and 30 years. These tissue samples are small, up to two centimeters across and three millimeters in thickness.

How long will the autopsy take?
The autopsy of your baby’s body will usually be done in a day. However depending on the type of autopsy, it can take up to three weeks to do all the tests. Your baby’s body will be returned as soon as the autopsy is completed.

Can you travel with your baby if the autopsy is at another hospital?
Parents are not usually able to travel with their baby to a different hospital for the autopsy. You can make private arrangements to travel to the hospital if you wish. Talk with your health care provider about the travel arrangements.

What costs are involved?
Costs depend on individual circumstances. Your health care provider and hospital will be able to tell you. The costs of transfer to another hospital will usually be covered by Queensland Health.

What happens after the autopsy?
After the autopsy, you will be able to see and hold your baby if you wish. Let your health care provider know before the autopsy that you might wish to see and hold your baby again. Your funeral director can assist you and arrange for you to spend time with your baby if you chose to do this.

After the autopsy, there will usually be some changes to your baby’s appearance. These changes will depend on what procedures were performed and the length of time since your baby died. Your baby will also feel very cold.

If your baby had an internal examination, you will notice stitches from the lower part of your baby’s neck to their pubic bone and across the back of your baby’s head if the brain was examined.

Depending on what examinations have occurred and whether organs have been removed (with your prior consent), you may also notice a change in the balance (weight) of your baby’s head and body.

When will you know the results of the autopsy?
The results will usually be available within about three months. Sometimes it may take longer for all necessary laboratory tests to be completed. Results will be sent to your doctor and/or your obstetrician. You can then make an appointment with your doctor to discuss these results.

Autopsies can’t always provide all the answers. However, autopsies do provide important information that may help you with your next pregnancy or other parents who have a stillbirth in the future.