Research using material from coronial autopsies: advice to researchers and ethics committees

Research involving coronial material raises unique legal and ethical issues arising from the provisions of the *Coroners Act 2003* and the fact that subjects are no longer alive.

Applications for research that involve any coronial material (including when primarily ‘clinical’ in nature) should be referred to the Forensic and Scientific Services Human Ethics Committee (FSS-HEC), which has established arrangements with the State Coroner, developed expertise in the field, and includes membership representing the Coroner’s Court. The FSS-HEC meets National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) requirements.

This guideline applies primarily to coronial research proposals at Forensic and Scientific Services (FSS) and/or to be conducted within Queensland Health facilities. The State Coroner may at his/her discretion choose to refer research proposals to the FSS-HEC that do not involve Queensland Health.

In this context, ‘coronial material’ includes everything derived from or related to coronial autopsies and investigations (e.g. tissue, microscope slides, wax blocks, blood samples, photographs, medical imaging, autopsy reports, and other documents). This material remains under the State Coroner’s control, even when it is held by pathologists, scientists and others employed by Queensland Health, and regardless of whether data is accessible in clinical or forensic AUSLAB.

Section 53 of the Coroners Act 2003governs access to coronial ‘investigation documents’, and requires those involved to be approved as ‘genuine researchers’. As all research on coronial material involves access to investigation documents and/or information derived from them, the FSS-HEC considers that approval as a genuine researcher will almost always be required.

Researchers occasionally seek access to deceased people or their families, or may request the retention of additional autopsy samples. Such proposals raise sensitive ethical and legal issues and may require consent from next of kin under the *Transplantation and Anatomy Act 1979*.

Review of applications by the FSS-HEC and approval as a genuine researcher ensure that the State Coroner approves of proposed research. The special requirements mentioned may cause approval of coronial research to take longer than conventional applications.

The Chief Forensic Pathologist has a special interest in managing research on coronial material, which therefore requires his/her approval if involving FSS or Queensland Health mortuaries.

## Checklist for research on coronial material

* Authorisation from the State Coroner.
* Approval as a ‘genuine researcher’.
* Review and approval by the FSS-HEC.
* Approval by the Chief Forensic Pathologist.
* Approval for access to forensic AUSLAB (if applicable).
* Consent under the Transplantation and Anatomy Act (if applicable).

## FSS Human Ethics Committee

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**Chair:** Dr Philip Storey, Forensic Pathologist

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