

Subject: Penn Medicine autopsies on patients with COVID-19 infection based at HUP and PPMC

The standard request for autopsy and options for restrictions has been modified in view of infectious precautions for COVID-19 and the high risk of aerosolization. In known COVID positive patients, the next of kin may ONLY be offered the option of a “Research Sample Only Autopsy.” The requirements and procedure for these special autopsies are detailed below:

- Research sample only: Patients will be assigned an autopsy case number but a formal clinical report will not be generated.
- Limited to the thorax and abdomen. Removal of the brain and spinal cord will not be performed due to technical requirement for bone saw use and risk of excess aerosolization.
- Limited to patients weighing less than 250 pounds.
- Rapid: targeting initiation within 6 hours of death.
- Targeting HUP but PPMC not excluded. Because of anticipated challenges in engaging funeral directors to transport bodies to HUP from PPMC within the intended time frame, availability of service for patients dying at PPMC is likely to be limited.
- Consent of the patient’s next of kin is required specifically for a research autopsy. De-identified samples from the thorax and abdomen will be taken to support approved research study protocols.

Suggestions for the process of obtaining consent, including recommended scripts for approaching family members for consent are included at the end of the document. Additional questions can be addressed to Dr. Leslie Litzky, Chief of Medical Pathology (Autopsy) llitzky@penntmedicine.upenn.edu

Why make this effort?

Requesting a special autopsy on COVID patients will support several meritorious research projects here at Penn Medicine and may shed light on several pressing clinical questions relevant to the care of patients with COVID-19 infection at Penn.

Autopsy requests for patients who are presumed to be COVID negative or in which the COVID status is unknown will require perimortem/post-mortem testing prior to the performance of an autopsy. The next of kin of documented COVID negative patients may be offered an unrestricted autopsy or an autopsy with restrictions as they request

Family approach script and FAQs:

Note: As is often the case with organ donation requests, apologetic approaches (e.g., “I’m sorry that I have to ask you this”) are less well-received by families and less likely to result in consent for research samples than confident but compassionate approaches.

If legal decision maker is present: approach and, if willing, obtain written permission on the standard autopsy consent form, noting “research autopsy” in the restriction section.

If legal decision maker is not present: offer autopsy at the time of death notification and, if willing, obtain telephone consent for a restricted research autopsy. An additional witness, in addition to the physician or clinician obtaining consent, will need to sign. Note “research autopsy” in the restriction section.

Introduction:

“We are deeply sorry for your loss. We wish you and your family strength during your time of grief.

This infection, COVID-19, is very new. We are still learning about how it harms the body and causes illness. We are still learning how to treat it. This virus has taken so much from you. We would still like to ask for your help, and your loved one’s help, in helping protect others from this virus.

You and your loved one can give a generous gift that will help other people and families. We ask that you give the gift of pieces of your loved one’s organs so that we can learn more about this virus. This donation would be through an autopsy procedure. This gift, and the ways that it makes medical care for others better, would become part of your loved one’s legacy.”

Why do you need this donation?

As a world-wide community, we are learning more about this virus every day. But we still do not understand how the body responds to the infection. Knowing how the virus causes illness can help us treat people sick with the virus, prevent the virus from spreading, and save lives. Your loved one’s donation of parts of the organs would be used for research about this virus to help others.

What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is a procedure that happens soon after a person’s death. In this situation, a Pathologist and a specially trained Pathologists’ Assistant would take out pieces of the internal organs through incisions in the chest and abdomen (belly). Other than the pieces your loved one donated, the remainder of the organs would stay in their body. The incisions would then be closed.

How long will this procedure take?

Typically, the procedure is done within one day after death. The procedure itself takes a few (2-4) hours. It is performed in the hospital by a specially trained doctor (Anatomic Pathologist).

Does donation prevent funeral viewings?

No, the procedure does not involve parts of the body that would prevent a viewing. This procedure will not delay funeral services, burial, or cremation. However, due to the world-wide spread of the virus, funeral homes may be unable to provide viewings at this time. Please discuss this with your chosen funeral home.

What tissue will you take?

The pathologist will take parts of your loved one's internal organs. Parts of the lungs, trachea (windpipe), heart, intestines, stomach, lymph nodes, and other organs will be sampled and collected to help us learn more about the virus. They will not take any of the brain or spinal cord.

Do I or my loved one have to pay for this procedure?

No, donating is a gift from your loved one. You and your loved one will not be charged anything.

Will I receive any information about what they find?

No, this is a donation only for research. The pathologist performing the autopsy procedure will not be able to give you specific information about your loved one.

Will my loved one's name be used?

No, your loved one's privacy will be protected at all times. Their name will not be used.

What if I say no?

You do not have to make this gift on behalf of your loved one. We will not perform any procedures without your permission. If you decline, the funeral home of your choice will pick up your loved one's body from the hospital.