

# Trying to find answers when your baby has died

## Autopsy

**This information brochure comes with our message of support following the loss of your precious baby. At a time of intense grief and many emotions, you may have been asked to think about an autopsy (sometimes called a post-mortem examination) for your baby. This is one of the most confronting decisions for parents when their baby dies. You may have many questions and concerns – most parents do. We hope this document provides you with information that will help make the decision that is best for you, your baby, and your family.**

### Thinking about an autopsy for your baby.

Thinking about whether to have an autopsy for your baby is hard. Your health care provider will offer the option of an autopsy as it provides the best chance of finding answers to help understand why your baby died.

An autopsy may also provide information that is important for the health and wellbeing of any other children you have now or may have in the future. It may also provide information about how to prevent stillbirth that may help other parents in the future.

*“We were struggling with the reality of the situation and not in a good place to make too many decisions. Talking with the midwives and the obstetrician helped. They answered some of our questions and provided information about what happens next”*

It is important to talk to your health care team about any questions or concerns you have. It may also be helpful to talk with others, including family members or other support people. You may also wish to seek spiritual or cultural guidance or support.

### What is an autopsy?

An autopsy (or post-mortem examination) is an external and internal examination of your baby that is performed after your baby's death. It is done to find out as much as possible about why your baby died.

Most parents will be asked to decide whether or not they agree to their baby having an autopsy, as well as the type of autopsy their baby will have. Very occasionally an autopsy will be required by law. Your healthcare provider will discuss the different options for autopsy in more detail with you, and you will be asked to give your informed consent before the autopsy is performed.

All autopsies are carried out by pathologists – doctors who are highly trained in this field and who will treat your baby with care and respect.

*“We wanted to find out the cause of death but feared what would happen to our baby's little body. My fear was as strong as that of a parent with a live child. It helped so much to be told that our baby would be treated with care and respect.”*

### Does an autopsy guarantee I'll find out why my baby died?

An autopsy does not always reveal a cause of death and it may not give all the answers to your questions. But it does give you the best chance of finding out. Even when a cause is not found, important information can be gained and can help to rule out some possible causes.

### Where does an autopsy take place?

Autopsies are usually performed at a specialised service. This may be within the hospital where your baby was born, or it may be somewhere else. Your doctor or hospital staff will be able to tell you where your baby will have this examination. They will also ensure you know who is caring for your baby at all times.

### What happens during an autopsy?

There are different types of autopsy. The more thorough the autopsy, the better the chance of getting accurate information.

### Full autopsy

This is the most thorough examination of your baby. It begins with a careful examination of the outside of the baby's body for any signs of abnormality. Your baby may have some imaging performed, such as an x-ray or MRI, and the placenta will be examined. This is followed by an internal examination. This is like an operation where an incision is made to allow examination of the chest and abdominal organs. A small incision is also made at the back of the head to examine the brain.

During the autopsy, small samples of tissue (like a biopsy) will be taken from some of your baby's organs. These small samples will be examined by doctors under a microscope to help provide further information on why your baby died. These samples of tissue won't be replaced after they have been examined.

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Once the autopsy is completed, all incisions will be carefully closed, leaving a fine line. Once your baby is dressed, the incisions will not be visible.

Sometimes, your baby's major organs – such as your baby's heart or brain – may need to be removed and examined more closely to gain the most information possible to understand your baby's cause of death. If your baby's major organs are removed, the testing may take some time to be completed. If this happens, you can:

- delay burial or cremation of your baby until these organs are returned to your baby's body.
- go ahead with the burial and cremation and have a separate burial or cremation for your baby's organs later.
- arrange for the hospital to take care of your baby's retained organs in a respectful and appropriate manner.

### Limited autopsy

Sometimes you may be able to choose to have only some parts of a full autopsy completed. You may decide to have an external examination of your baby's body and only some tissue samples taken. Or you may choose to have an external examination of your baby's body with only some organs examined internally by the pathologist, such as the abdominal organs.

### External examination only

You may decide you want only an external examination of your baby's body and x-ray or MRI scans completed. These scans will provide pictures of your baby's internal organs, tissues and bones, without the pathologist directly examining any of your baby's internal organs. The amount of information provided by an external examination or scan only can be quite limited depending on the clinical circumstances.

### Will I be able to see my baby after the autopsy?

Parents often wish to see their baby again once the autopsy is complete. You and your family will usually be able to see and hold your baby after an autopsy if you wish.

You can get more information about seeing and holding your baby after an autopsy from your health care team, the hospital social worker, or your funeral director.

### When do I need to decide?

Your health care team will usually discuss the option of autopsy with you soon after your baby's death. Generally, it is best for

an autopsy to be conducted as soon as practically possible, as in some cases a delay may mean you get less accurate information.

### When can I expect the results from the autopsy?

The doctor who cared for your baby will usually get a preliminary report from the pathologist within a few weeks, but it may take some months to get the final comprehensive report. The time it takes will vary.

Talk to your health care provider about this. Many parents find it helpful to know how they will receive the results, to know who they can contact if they have any questions, and when a follow-up meeting will occur.

Sometimes, the results of an autopsy mean the cause of death on your baby's death certificate will need to be changed.

### How do I know if I am making the right decision?

It is a difficult decision, and there is no right or wrong answer. To work out what is most important to you, it may help to write down some of the questions or concerns you have.

The most important thing is that you have clear information that will help you to make the decision that seems right for you.

### Is there someone else I can talk to?

For further information and support about any aspect of your loss, please contact:

#### Red Nose

The Red Nose Bereavement Support Service provides specialised support for anyone affected by the death of a baby or young child. This includes peer support and professional counselling services, online and by phone, and support services designed for fathers.

**For immediate support please call the 24/7 Bereavement Support Line on: 1300 308 307**

[rednose.org.au](http://rednose.org.au)

*This brochure was produced by Stillbirth Centre of Research Excellence in partnership with Stillbirth Foundation Australia and the Perinatal Society of Australia and New Zealand [stillbirthcre.org.au/parents/care-after-loss/](http://stillbirthcre.org.au/parents/care-after-loss/)*