



Guidelines for the Retention of Tissues and Organs at Post-mortem Examinations

Despite development in the investigation and management of patients, post-mortem examinations continue to serve the public by providing information leading to advances in the practice of clinical medicine. New imaging techniques have not superseded the traditional post-mortem examination, but are evaluated against post-mortem examination as the 'gold standard'.

In most cases, the post-mortem examination involves the retention of tissue samples or fluids for laboratory examination and, in some cases, there will be a need also to retain one or more whole organs for further examination in order to obtain anatomical evidence of the cause of death and to study the effects of treatment.

Post-mortem examinations required by law:

The retention of organs/tissues of all coroner cases performed in HK is governed by the Coroners Ord. Cap. 504. Section 5 of the Coroners Rules stipulates that

“A pathologist performing an autopsy shall make provision, so far as is reasonably practicable, for the preservation of material which in his opinion is relevant to the cause of or the circumstances connected with the death of the person the subject of the autopsy -

- (a) for such period as the coroner who ordered the autopsy specifies;
- (b) if no such period is so specified, for such period as the pathologist thinks fit.”

Post-mortem examinations performed with relatives' agreement:

It is important that any tissue retained must match the relatives' perception of what they agreed to being retained and its purpose. The form of agreement for post-mortem examination and the accompanying information should be sufficiently explicit and unambiguous so that the relatives' understanding of what they are likely to be requested to agree for retention will match the pathologist's requirements where these are known in advance. The form of agreement should distinguish between retention for the purposes of obtaining anatomical evidence of the cause of death and investigating the effects of



treatment and retention for medical education and research. Relatives should also be given options for the lawful disposal of any tissue or organs retained for obtaining anatomical evidence of the cause of death and investigating the effects of treatment; these options should include allowing their further use for medical education and research.

The retention of tissue samples and fluids for laboratory investigation for the purpose of obtaining anatomical evidence of the cause of death and investigating the effects of treatment is an integral component of the post-mortem examination; therefore, this should be included in the agreement for the post-mortem examination itself.

Disposal of tissue retained at any post-mortem examination:

All histopathology and forensic pathology services should have written standard operating procedures and protocols for the disposal of tissues including regular review of tissue stores and maintenance of accurate records of the disposal of all specimens.

Except for further use or long term storage, all organs and tissues, after completion of examination, should be disposed of respectfully.