



## Perinatal Autopsy Information for parents

### Losing a baby is painful. Looking for answers can help.

**We are committed to supporting and caring for you and your family. Although nothing can change your loss, a perinatal autopsy may offer answers to better understand what happened.**

#### Why do an autopsy?

A perinatal autopsy is a medical exam done on the fetus or infant to help explain the cause of death. This exam may find a reason for an illness, disease, or birth defect. Findings from an autopsy can also be very important to understand some genetic test results. In some cases, what we learn from the autopsy may tell us about a risk for future pregnancies or others in the family. This is often the only chance we have to study everything that could be related to the loss.

#### What does an autopsy include?

A complete autopsy includes an examination of the outside body parts and the internal organs. Incisions (cuts) are made to look inside the body. Small samples are taken from the organs and studied with a microscope. In some cases, more samples may be taken for laboratory tests, such as genetic testing or infectious studies. For fetuses and newborns, examination of the placenta is usually part of the autopsy.

#### Can I request a limited autopsy?

Yes. The autopsy can be limited to specific organs or body parts; however, this might lower the chance of finding answers. If a limited autopsy is desired, the goals and limitations should be talked about before the autopsy. Details about what you want to include in a limited autopsy should be clearly written on the consent form.

#### Does anything prevent an autopsy?

Not usually. An autopsy can be done on a fetus, newborn or child of any size, and can be done regardless of how the pregnancy ended. There are very few times when an autopsy is not able to be done at all. An autopsy may be incomplete when a fetus dies before delivery, or when a surgical procedure is used to end the pregnancy. However, even in these situations, useful information may still be gained by having an autopsy.

#### Who performs an autopsy?

An autopsy is performed by a doctor called a pathologist who has special training in medical exams after death. At Kaiser Permanente, autopsies on fetuses and infants are done by **fetal pathologists**, who are experts in problems that happen during fetal life and the newborn period. All perinatal autopsies are done in the Fetal Pathology Department located at the Kaiser Permanente Oakland facility.

How long does an autopsy take?

A perinatal autopsy usually takes about 3 to 4 working days, and the remains can be quickly returned to the delivering hospital. The Fetal Pathology service does most autopsies Monday through Friday. Special requests can be made if there are medical or religious reasons for an autopsy to be done during evening or weekend hours. This needs to be approved by the fetal pathologist first. The autopsy report usually waits for results from the microscope studies and any special testing that was done. Most perinatal autopsy reports are available in about one month.

How do we get the results?

The finished autopsy report is filed in the medical chart. For a stillborn or fetal loss, the report is filed in the mother's chart. The report gives a detailed summary and is usually several pages long. Typically, your medical doctor or genetic counselor reviews the autopsy findings by phone or in-person. For complicated cases, the pathologist can be included in the follow-up visit to go over the findings.

Can an autopsy be done without my permission?

All hospital autopsies require a consent form signed by the parent. There are also ways to give consent by phone. By law, only the County Coroner can order an autopsy without the parent's permission; this process is not under the control of the Hospital.

What happens after the autopsy?

What happens after the autopsy depends on several things; including the timing of the loss, your desires, and California law.

- **Loss before 20 weeks in pregnancy or after ANY elective pregnancy termination:** When a fetus dies before 20 weeks gestation, or when the pregnancy was ended by a termination, you can choose to have Kaiser handle the remains. Remains are cremated but visitation is not possible. The State of California does not routinely issue death certificates for these cases. If you want the remains handled by a local mortuary (funeral home) you can ask to have them returned to the delivering hospital after the autopsy. From there, the hospital will release the remains to a mortuary you select.
- **Loss after 20 weeks in pregnancy, stillbirth, or infant death:** When there is an infant or fetal death after 20 weeks gestation, the remains are returned to the delivering hospital after the autopsy. From there, the remains are released to a mortuary chosen by the family.

Can we have a funeral after an autopsy?

Routine funeral services can be arranged after any autopsy. It is even possible in some situations to have an open casket, if that is what the family wants. Families who choose cremation should be aware that there may be few ashes. Parents should talk with the mortuary about their options.

Is there a charge for the autopsy?

Autopsies are done at the hospital's expense. Kaiser Permanente members are not billed for autopsy services. There is also no charge to families when Kaiser handles the remains. However, any costs for a mortuary or private funeral services are paid by the family.