

## **Pronouncing a Patient's Death—UW Medicine 2008**

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If you don't know the patient, briefly review chart.

1. Consider calling attending **before** speaking with family.
2. If family is present, explain your role and express sympathy.
3. Identify patient by hospital armband.
4. Examine the patient:
  - Try to arouse by gently calling name, and rubbing face or chest.
  - Listen for heart sounds and respirations.
  - Feel for a carotid pulse.
  - Check for pupillary light reflex.
  - If all are absent, the patient is dead. Time of your exam = time of death.
5. If family is not present, call the legal next of kin (NOK) and identify yourself.
  - Deliver the message – “Mrs. Smith, your husband died at 8:30 this evening. I'm sorry for your loss.”
  - If possible, tell family the patient died comfortably – “I wasn't with him, but the nurses tell me he passed away peacefully.”
  - Ask if family wish to see the patient, and let nursing staff know.
6. BEFORE requesting consent for autopsy, determine if the death should be reported to the Medical Examiner:
  - Death caused by injury or violence of any type, no matter how long ago the injury occurred
  - Death related to a complication of a procedure or treatment
  - Death related to drug overdose or to poisoning
  - Unexpected death of an apparently healthy person
  - Death which is suspicious in any way
  - Death of a patient transferred from an institution (jail, detoxification unit, etc)

Medical examiner may “decline” the case, but it is your responsibility to report. For those of you in Seattle, see <http://www.metrokc.gov/health/examiner/policy/index.htm>
7. Discuss autopsy with family in most cases. If unsure, check with attending first. Before asking the family for autopsy consent, determine if the death falls under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner. Autopsy consent is not requested for Medical Examiner cases.
  - “We don't know exactly why your mother died. An autopsy may help us determine the cause of death. Would you give permission for an autopsy?”
  - “Even though we have a good idea of what caused your father's death, an autopsy can give us more information about how to treat others with his disease.”
8. Write a death note including:
  - Date and Time of death
  - Circumstances of death
  - Exam findings
  - Whether next of kin and attending were notified
9. Each hospital has a “death packet” of paperwork, which will be sent to the floor for you to fill out, and includes required forms and corresponding instructions.
11. Complete the death certificate. See <http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehsphi/chs/chs-data/public/basics.pdf> for instructions.