

Religious and Cultural Perspectives on Autopsies

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Objectives

1. Recognize the impact of cultural and religious beliefs on postmortem care and autopsies.
2. Identify strategies for culturally competent discussion of autopsies with families.
3. Improve understanding of family perspectives related to postmortem care.



Starting Point

- Autopsies and postmortem examinations can provide benefit to medical practice and science, the judicial system, public welfare, and surviving family and friends.
- Despite this, autopsies are a relatively uncommon practice following death. Current estimates place U.S. autopsy rates at 5-10% after Joint Commission removed the 20% mandate in 1970.
- Not all objections are religiously or culturally based.
- Lack of trust in medical staff may influence decision making and may be affected by religious, ethnic, and socio-economic background.



Patient Population

Akron Children's 2019 Patient Census Data

- Self-reported religious preference*
 - >85% Christian (Catholic, Protestant, Non-Denominational)
 - 1.7% Amish/Mennonite/Anabaptist
 - 1.2% Muslim
 - 0.5% Hindu
 - 0.5% Jehovah's Witness
 - 0.5% Jewish
 - 0.2% Buddhist

*Of those providing religious preference



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Universal Concerns Regarding Autopsy

- Delaying the funeral or interfering with rituals and practices associated with end of life.
- Mutilation of the body that will affect the ability to have an open casket viewing.
- Harm to the body, not respecting the body or honoring its dignity.



Christian Views and Teachings

- Generally positive and accepting of use for education, organ transplantation, and diagnosis. May be viewed as a charitable act toward others.
- The body is a “tent” or “clothes” for the spirit (2 Corinthians 5), and at the moment of death the spirit leaves the body (Luke 23).
- The Roman Catholic Church banned mutilation of dead bodies in 1153, though primarily due to practices related to the Crusades and were approved by the Vatican in the 13th century and increased during the Renaissance.



Muslim Views and Teachings

- Autopsies are not encouraged, and some teachings suggest that they are not permissible.
- Muslims adhere to the Qur'an and Sharia law which describe specific rules regarding the handling of bodies after death, prefer burial to take place as soon as possible (often within 24 hours), and believe the body should be retained in its original form.
- *Fatwa* (legal opinion based on Islamic law) have made for some allowances for autopsies, especially based on the principle of *Maslaha* (public benefit) which weighs benefits and damages.
- May prefer a physician of the same gender perform the autopsy.
- Autopsies are generally more acceptable in the U.S. than in traditionally Muslim nations like Maldives where the first autopsy was not performed until 1997. Traditionally Muslim countries differ in decision making hierarchy.



Jewish Views and Teachings

- Follow teachings of the Torah, Tanach, and Talmud, sources of Jewish law known as *Halcha*.
- Humans created in the image of God (Genesis 1) and therefore the body must be respected, even after death.
- *Nivel ha'met* prohibits the desecration of the dead.
- Timely burial (Deuteronomy 21) and the ability to bury the body intact are guiding principles because of the belief that body and soul are reunited at the resurrection.
- Benefiting from the dead is generally prohibited, but the commandment of *pikuach nefesh* make some laws permissible in order to save a life.



Other Religious Views and Teachings

- Amish generally open to autopsy without restrictions, but cost should be considered.
- Jehovah's Witnesses object to body mutilation, but may agree under certain circumstances and should comply when required by law.
- Hindus believe in reincarnation and strive to provide a smooth journey to death as the soul may leave the body but remain aware. Though the body free of spirit has no karmic obligations, it may be considered disturbing and distasteful to the soul and not accepted unless required by law.
- Buddhists allow that individuals should make decisions for themselves and believe the body to be a shell for the spirit. The body should be treated with respect and the soul allowed to leave the body before an autopsy is considered.



Recommendations

- While certain religions do not favor autopsies, there may be exceptions in specific circumstances.
- Most religions will support legally required autopsies.
- Knowing the concerns discussed can help address the misgivings families may have about autopsies.
- Explain the benefits of the autopsy and stress that their loved one's body will be treated with dignity and respect, and efforts will be made to allow for desired funeral arrangements.
- Collaboration over confrontation. Even in cases of medicolegal autopsy, attempts to work with families and their faith leaders will make the process easier.
- Consider minimally invasive approaches limited only to areas of the body that need to be examined, or utilize imaging, blood and tissue testing.
- Conduct the autopsy with expedience and with minimal relocation of the body. In situations of anticipated death, one may be able to plan in advance to minimize delay.
- Maintain or return the body to its natural and whole state so much as is possible.



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