

Procedure for brain autopsies and tissue donation to the Oregon Brain Bank at Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) (updated January 2012)

The Oregon Brain Bank (OBB) has two missions: 1) to help families to learn the exact diagnosis of a brain disease, and 2) to promote brain disease research by providing scientists with autopsy tissue samples to study in their laboratories. Currently, the OBB accepts brain donations from families as long as there are no legal issues that indicate that the evaluation would be better done by a medical examiner.

The process of brain autopsy is relatively simple and the OBB will work with families at each of these three steps:

1. Call the director of the OBB, Dr. Randy Woltjer, at (503) 494-0100, to discuss the potential diagnoses, the wish for brain autopsy, and the process of what to do when a family member passes away. The process is also summarized in the overview presented below.
2. At the time of death, the OBB needs to be notified, as soon as is practically possible. Usually it is possible to make the diagnosis of brain disease even a few days after death. However, if tissue is to be used for research into a disease, the sooner the autopsy is performed, the more uses it will have.

That having been said, the wishes and needs of the family at the time of death will always have priority over those of the OBB, and family members should not feel “pressured” to take actions that they are not comfortable with at any time.

The OBB is notified by calling the OHSU hospital operator at (503) 494-9125 and asking for Dr. Woltjer to be paged. You can wait on the line for an answer, or leave a call-back number. If there is no response, please call the hospital operator again and ask for the neuropathologist on call to be paged instead, and he or she will refer the case to Dr. Woltjer if he is in town, or make other arrangements if he isn't.

At the time of death, Dr. Woltjer will work with the family to accomplish two things: 1) to obtain consent for brain autopsy from the legal next of kin (this can be done over the phone), and 2) to work with the funeral home or a transportation company to have the body brought to OHSU, or to have the brain removal done locally if the body is distant from Portland. After brain autopsy, the body is returned to the funeral home, and the family can proceed with any other arrangements they have made.

3. After an extensive evaluation of the brain tissue, which usually takes a couple to a few months, Dr. Woltjer will call the family to discuss the results. If they wish, the family can receive a written report of the complete findings, with a summarizing letter.

Tissue that is not needed for diagnosis is used for research into brain diseases of many sorts, depending on the exact diagnosis. Tissue from a single brain donor may contribute to dozens of studies and the brain bank currently supports around 50 collaborative research projects in Oregon and around the country.

The cost of brain autopsies of those who are enrolled in studies at the Layton Aging and Alzheimer's Disease Center at OHSU are paid for by a research grant. If brain autopsy is desired for others, who are not subjects in these studies, we ask if the family is willing and able to pay the transportation costs for delivery of the body to OHSU. Funeral homes typically charge a few hundred dollars for this. Dr. Woltjer does not charge a professional fee for the diagnostic evaluation, and the family will not receive a bill from OHSU for the laboratory work that is done to make the diagnosis; but the OBB is grateful for gifts that support the continuation of its missions. If the family wishes to support the OBB, the Layton Aging and Alzheimer's Disease Center, or other programs of brain disease research that are carried out at OHSU, the OHSU Foundation may be contacted at (503) 228-1730 to learn how to do this. Financial donors will receive a tax receipt from OHSU for any contribution they wish to make.