

Religious and Cultural Considerations for Autopsy

Often religious and cultural beliefs are cited as a major reason why a family may not consent to an autopsy or why a physician may not ask based on the assumption of the family's beliefs¹. There are many different beliefs and traditions that surround death but most religions and cultures find autopsies acceptable based on the individual's belief or special circumstances (e.g. their child dying from cancer and wanting to donate tumor samples to research in hopes to help another child in the future). Below is a brief overview of various major religions that you might find helpful when considering how a family may feel about an autopsy.

We encourage you to always ask a family what their beliefs are about an autopsy and inquire as to whether it is something they would want to consider in the event of their child's death. Educating the families about such options allow the family to make the best decision possible for themselves. Although obtaining tumor samples for research is valuable, honoring the patient and family's wishes should be top priority. Be sure to acknowledge that any decision they make will be taken with the greatest respect.

American Indians: Spirituality is the center of most American Indian beliefs but they vary from tribe to tribe. Most believe that death is a natural part of life and that the body should not be disturbed while the spirit crosses over to the other side to join ancestors. In some tribes, autopsies are viewed as desecration to the body and not desired. Since care of the body varies between tribes, in some instances autopsies may be permitted.

Buddhism: There is great cultural diversity in Buddhism but in general they see autopsies as a form of compassion that helps preserve life. It is important that the body is highly respected so the spirit can concentrate on achieving enlightenment. Due to this, the body should not be disturbed for three days or until a religious leader has determined that the soul has left the body.

Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism): In most sects, it is believed that death is when the spirit leaves the body and returns to God. Catholics accept the value of an autopsy and often see it as an act of charity in order to help others. Although there are several rituals surrounding death, an autopsy would not interfere as long as the body was treated with respect.

Christian Science: Autopsies are not prohibited but followers are reluctant to taking part in western medicine as they believe that God is the only true healer. Although most will find no purpose or benefit to postmortem examinations, there are special circumstances where autopsies can be performed if it was the wish of the deceased person.

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: Autopsies are viewed as a contribution to improving the quality of life and health of others. Mormons may first seek the Lord for guidance in making a decision that will give them the most peace and comfort about an autopsy.

Hinduism: Hindus believe in a cycle of rebirth and redeath where death is not viewed as the end of life. An autopsy may be disturbing to the soul and are usually avoided unless required by law.

Islam: Although the Koran does not directly discuss autopsies many Islamic doctrines do. Muslims have rigid rituals after death and do not encourage autopsies as the procedure could harm the body and delay burial, which should happen as soon as possible. Furthermore, transporting the body away from the site of death is not favored. Autopsies are allowed in certain countries for specific reasons such as medical education and pathological diagnosis. Family members may have to consent to the deceased's wishes and autopsies may be limited to only the relevant body cavities.

Jehovah's Witness: Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the dead is conscious of nothing but the body was created by Jehovah God and should not be mutilated. Autopsies are generally not favored unless required by law.

Judaism: Since Jews believe that the body belongs to God there is varied interpretation to whether a person has the right to decide what is done to their body following death. Rabbis may permit autopsies if the donation is seen as saving another's life and if the body is not disrespected. Great care should be taken to perform the postmortem exam so only the necessary body parts are removed and all fluids and organs should be returned to the body cavity. Autopsies should be performed as soon as possible to allow for a rapid burial and the family may request that a rabbi presides over the autopsy.

As you can see, there is a lot of variation between each religion and culture. Although some religions may not advocate for autopsies, exceptions may be made given the circumstance. We again encourage you to talk with your patients and their families about their beliefs and allow them to make the decision to consent to an autopsy or not.

1. Burton EC, Gurevitz, Stacy A. Religions and Autopsy. 2010.