Removal of medical equipment after death

Advice correct as of November 2014

If a patient dies and the death is reportable to the coroner, you should leave all equipment in place until you have discussed the case with the coroner’s officer. This factsheet gives you further information about what to do.

Equipment that is needed for other patients

If the patient has been connected to equipment that is needed urgently for other patients – for example, a ventilator – you should take a photograph or make a sketch diagram before it is disconnected from the patient. The sketch or photograph may preserve forensic evidence that could be crucial to the coroner’s investigations.

The equipment should not be disconnected or used again if it is possibly faulty or could be the subject of an investigation into a possible complaint or adverse event.

Other equipment

Equipment such as intravenous lines, drains, catheters etc should be left undisturbed. This is to preserve any forensic evidence, and to give the coroner’s pathologist the best opportunity for independent inspection and assessment of the case. The equipment may be relevant not only in cases of possible crime, but also in cases where the clinical management may be called into question.

Examples of items that should be left undisturbed include:

- Endotracheal tubes
- Intravascular lines
- Drains
- Cannulae
- Catheters
- Feeding tubes
- Defibrillator pads
- Cardiac pacing devices
- Sutures

This list is NOT exhaustive.

Faulty equipment

If you think that any piece of equipment might be at fault, it must be left untouched and, if possible, sealed and stored in a locked room or cupboard. It can be then be examined on behalf of the coroner and/or the Health and Safety Executive.

Sudden or violent death

In cases of sudden or violent death – for example, in the A&E Department or where patients are brought in dead – the clothing should be left undisturbed. Any item (e.g., a knife, needle or syringe) should not be touched. It should be left for forensic examination and will be dealt with by the scene-of-crime police officer or the forensic pathologist. If it is necessary to remove clothing or equipment, you should make a careful note of this.

If there is anything you are unsure about, contact the coroner’s officer and they will be able to provide you with further information. Each case is different and the facts of the case will assist in making the appropriate decisions.

Cremations

It is essential that pacemakers and/or radioactive implants are removed before the body is taken away for cremation in order to avoid the risk of causing an explosion in the crematorium.

Further information

- Justice, Coroners guides – Coroners – www.justice.gov.uk/coroners-burial-cremations/coroners
- Coroners’ Officers and Staff Association – www.coasa.org.uk

www.mps.org.uk
This factsheet provides only a general overview of the topic and should not be relied upon as definitive guidance. If you are an MPS member, and you are facing an ethical or legal dilemma, call and ask to speak to a medicolegal adviser, who will give you specific advice.

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For medicolegal advice please call us on:

0800 561 9090

or email us at: querydoc@mps.org.uk

www.mps.org.uk


Cremation Society of Great Britain – www.cremation.org.uk


MPS factsheet, Reporting Deaths to the Coroner – www.medicalprotection.org/uk/england-factsheets/reporting-deaths-to-the-coroner

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