

# NSW Statewide Perinatal Post-Mortem Service



Health  
Pathology

## An explanation for families



The Sydney  
children's  
Hospitals Network  
care, advocacy, research, education

***This information has been prepared for families whose baby has died or whose pregnancy has ended with the death of their baby.***

The death of a baby, at any stage of pregnancy or following birth is a tragic experience that is unique for every bereaved parent. We are committed to providing the best possible care to your baby and your family.

We know this is a very distressing time for families and we hope this information helps in deciding whether you would like to go ahead with a post-mortem (also known as an autopsy) for your baby. In certain cases, a post-mortem is required by the coroner. If this is the case, your care providers will discuss what happens next.

When your baby has died during, or shortly after pregnancy, you will be offered a variety of tests that may help to find out what contributed to your loss. One of those tests is a perinatal post-mortem.

A post-mortem is the medical examination of a body after death by medical specialist. Post-mortems for babies are carried out by specialised Perinatal Pathologists who will treat your baby with respect and care.

These doctors specialise in identifying conditions that affect babies who have died during, or shortly after pregnancy. In NSW, non-coronial post-mortem examinations are undertaken at one of three sites, depending on where your baby is born: John Hunter Hospital in Newcastle, Prince of Wales Hospital in Randwick or The Children's Hospital at Westmead. The examination is undertaken to standards set by the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia.

## Why we offer a post-mortem for your baby

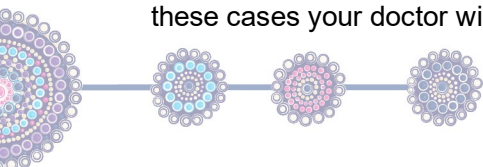
If you are being offered a post-mortem for your baby, the clinicians caring for you believe that a perinatal post-mortem may help give more information about what happened during your pregnancy. A perinatal post-mortem examination can also help to rule out potentially recurrent causes for perinatal death and to help with the planning of any future pregnancies, even if a definite cause of death for your baby is not found.

There are different types of post-mortems and your Doctor will discuss with you what may be the most appropriate examination for your child. In all perinatal post-mortems, the placenta and umbilical cord are also examined. Photos and x-rays will be taken of your baby before the post-mortem examination begins.

What may be important for you to understand, is that post-mortems performed on babies like yours are attended by Perinatal Pathologists who specialise in this area. These medical specialists only perform autopsies on babies, and they understand the depth and significance of your loss. The examination process performed on each baby is done with care and respect, with the consideration that you may want to spend more time with your baby following the procedure, prior to burial or cremation.

## Different types of post-mortems

- In a **full post-mortem** the Perinatal Pathologist will usually make two openings, one down the front of the body and one across the back of the head. This allows the Perinatal Pathologist to remove and examine all the major organs (or those agreed to beforehand with you), and to take samples of tissue and fluid (such as blood) for examination in detail. The organs are then returned to their original position in the body. In some circumstances, other incisions need to be made if muscle or bone sampling is required - in these cases your doctor will discuss this with you. After a post-mortem all incisions will be closed, and your



baby will be cleaned and dressed.

- A **limited post-mortem** investigates only part of your baby’s body. This is recommended only in some circumstances when the clinicians caring for you and your baby have some indication of what was affecting your baby.
- An **external post-mortem** includes photographs, x-ray, external examination of your baby and examination of the placenta. Unless you have consented to further examination, no incisions will be made on your baby.

### After your baby’s post-mortem

Many families want to spend time with their baby after they are born, and this can be a healthy part of the grieving process. Just like any other surgery, when the doctor has completed the surgery, the incisions will be closed and your baby will be cleaned and dressed. In many cases, once your baby is dressed, there is very little sign of the surgery your baby has undergone. Many families choose to spend time with their baby after a post-mortem, either in a funeral home or in some cases in their home.

### The results of your baby’s post-mortem

When your baby’s post-mortem is complete, we will follow your wishes with regards to funeral home, return to your hospital or respectful cremation of your baby. These processes vary around NSW, so please speak to your clinician about what is most appropriate for your family. You can also contact the Perinatal Post-Mortem Coordinator to discuss your options. Your clinicians will organise follow up with you when they have received the perinatal post-mortem report. The testing done during a perinatal post-mortem is extensive, so a final report may take a few months. In most cases, your clinicians will receive a preliminary report within a few weeks of your baby’s post-mortem.

**Please use the space below to document any questions that come up while you discuss a perinatal post-mortem with your treating clinicians and family.**

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### Useful Contacts

NSW Statewide Perinatal Post-Mortem Clinical Care Coordinator: 0436 698 366

Social Worker: \_\_\_\_\_