

Establishment of a Postmortem Centre Mortuary - III: Protocols and Guidelines for Dead Body Handling and Preservation

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Abstract

Handling and preservation of dead bodies has to be done with utmost care to maintain the dignity of the person. Failure to stand up to these expectations is not only unacceptable on Humanitarian aspects but may raise a lot of concerns about the service in the mortuary facility of a hospital. The errors which can occur at the Mortuary are the exchange of dead bodies, mutilation by rodents and decomposition due to improper temperature maintenance. The authors in this article aim to describe the broad Standard Operatives Procedures regarding body preservation and handling in a Mortuary Setup for deaths occurring in Hospital, bodies brought by police and death occurring of outside the hospital. All these can be avoided if proper guidelines are laid and followed for dead body handling and preservation. Hospital policy makers and administrators need to lay down the proper guidelines and sincere attention for effective implementation of the guidelines for smooth functioning of the mortuary.

Keywords: Mortuary Management; Dead Body preservation; Medicolegal Cases; Forensic Medicine.

Introduction

The Hospitals are not only meant for treatment but also have an obligation to look after the deceased in accordance with Community and Legal framework. The handling and preservation of dead bodies has to be done with utmost care to maintain the dignity of the person. Failure to stand up to these expectations is not only unacceptable on Humanitarian aspects but may raise a lot of concerns about the service in the mortuary facility of a hospital.¹⁻³ Guidelines and working protocols regarding body preservations in a Mortuary need to be robust and clear. Adherence to the Standards and Protocols are of utmost importance and is very much essential in smooth running of the Mortuary facility and service. The authors in their previous

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two articles in this series deliberated upon the basic infrastructure of Establishment of a Postmortem Centre Mortuary⁴ and manpower and human resource management.⁵ In continuation of the series of these articles regarding Mortuary Management, the authors in this article aim to describe the broad Standard Operatives Procedures regarding body preservation and handling in a Mortuary Setup.

Dignified Management of the Dead

The dignity and respect of the dead should be maintained under all circumstances. The hospital is not absolved of responsibility until the dead person is duly handed over to the next of kin of the deceased. The doctors and staff should be sensitized for sympathetic dealing with the relatives and respectful handling of the dead body. If a person expires in the hospital, the body is not to be placed on the floor or otherwise kept carelessly. It should not be treated in a way that might hurt the sentiments of the next of kin. The dead body must be released directly from the ward/ICU/ (Non - MLC) if it requested by the legal heirs as unnecessary delay may cause decomposition and inconvenience to the relatives. Where mortuary facilities exist, the body should be wrapped properly in clean linen sheets and transported properly by deploying stretcher,

ambulance or trolley, to the mortuary premises where it should be placed under cold storage. It is the responsibility of the hospitals to have the dead bodies properly identified and to tag/label them appropriately to maintain their identity. There should be separate storage facility meant for the dead bodies, which should not be used for storage of bio medical waste or other items.

Standard Operating Procedures/Guidelines for Handling and Storage of Dead Bodies in Hospital Deaths⁶⁻¹¹

A. Aim: To provide respectful, timely and professional handling, transport and storage of dead bodies.

B. Objectives

1. To take away dead bodies from the hospital wards as and when requested in a timely and professional manner.
2. Ensure safe transport and storage of dead bodies in mortuary till they are handed over to the appropriate custodians.
3. Handling over the body to the appropriate custodian under receipt.
4. Maintain proper record of incoming and outgoing dead bodies.
5. Maintain the dignity of the dead throughout.
6. Proper Identification of the body at every level.

C. Function

1. Pick up of dead bodies from hospital wards.
2. Storage of dead bodies until they are taken away for final disposal.
3. Safe preservation of the bodies to prevent any deterioration /decomposition.
4. Physical security against theft of bodies / body parts.
5. Handling over the bodies to the investigating officer (in case of MLC bodies)/authorized next to kin (in case non MLC bodies) after proper identification of the body and the recipient.
6. Maintenance of record of all bodies received and handed over.

D. Transport of Dead Body to Mortuary

1. After death, the body should be labelled with the help of waterproof lockable black bands/tags/labels tied to one of the extremities, preferably right wrist.
2. Identification data should be carefully recorded on these bands/tags/labels.
3. In addition in medico legal cases these bands should be stamped in red ink with the letters MLC.
4. Nursing staff on duty in the ward should ensure that surgical operation /drainage site if any is properly dressed before the body is wrapped.
5. Nursing staff on duty in the ward should ensure that dead body is wrapped in leak proof sheet/ plastic bag before it is handed over to next of kin or mortuary attendant.
6. When a mortuary attendant is informed that a pick up or removal is necessary, from the wards they should receive bodies in a courteous, sensitive and professional manner.
7. They should receive the duly wrapped and labelled body along with relevant record (death slip) and after confirming the identity of the deceased.
8. They should load the body on removal stretcher/ambulance and transport it carefully to the mortuary.
9. They should always operate with their safety and security in mind and should wear Personal Protective Equipment.

E. Intake Procedure and Maintenance of Mortuary Register

1. Identify the body by the ID label/band.
2. Death Slip particulars should be matched with ID.
3. Record the body received in the Body Register of Mortuary.
4. Following column should be there in Body register (a long, thick and durable register):
 - a) Serial number
 - b) Name
 - c) Age
 - d) Sex
 - e) Address

- f) Hospital registration number
 - g) MLC/ Non MLC
 - h) Date and time of Death
 - i) Date and time of receiving the body in Mortuary
 - j) Body brought from
 - k) Signature of On -Duty Mortuary staff receiving the body
 - l) Date and time of handling over the body to next of kin/Investigating officer
 - m) Particulars of person receiving the body like name, signature, contact number, address and relation with the deceased.
 - n) Signature of On - Duty Mortuary staff handing over the body
5. Arrange for storing the body in cold storage.
 3. Locate and retrieve body from refrigerated storage.
 4. Assist in transferring the body to hearse van with due care and dignity.
 5. Sign body out of body register.
 6. Note down recipient's particulars with signatures.
 7. In MLC cases body is to be received by Police officials.
 8. Hospital should provide coffin cloth to wrap the body free of cost.

F. Body storage

1. Store in proper refrigerated storage cabinets/shelves or cold chambers at a temperature of 3.5 to 6.5 degree Celsius.
2. Infected /decomposed dead bodies should be stored in separate freezers, if possible.
3. Ensure that there is no access for rodents/pests into the body storage area.
4. Keep storage area clean and free from any such matter which may attract rodents /pests.
5. There should be power back up round the clock.
6. The cold storage room /cabinet should be kept under key and lock. The opening of cold storage and releasing of body should only be permitted by authorized person.
7. The capacity of the body storage should be twice the daily average intake of bodies in the Mortuary.
8. The Cold Chambers should have a double compressor which can be switched on alternatively for fail safe mechanism.

G. Releasing a Body

1. Confirming the particulars of the body to be released.
2. Verify the identity of the recipient/kin.

Standard Operating Procedures / Guidelines in Medicolegal Cases Brought by Police

Mortuaries usually handle Medico-legal case (MLC) deaths occurring in the attached Hospital or in the Jurisdiction of the police stations attached to the Mortuary. Non MLC cases are generally kept for a short duration till the relatives make the arrangement for last rites. In MLC cases, the custodian of dead bodies in all cases of deaths where further legal investigations are required is the jurisdictional police. The Hospital / Mortuary is just a facilitator for preserving the dead bodies. The custody and responsibility of body directly lies with the Police without any third party intervention.

1. The request for preservation has to be permitted by authorized doctors.
2. The police personnel depositing the dead body in mortuary cold chamber for preservation must ensure that tag/label indicating the name of police post with FIR/DD number has been put on the dead body for purposes of identification.
3. No dead body should be received and stored in the cold storage by the staff without any identity tags/labels.
4. The permission for preservation of the dead body has to be taken from the officer in-charge on duty by filling a request form.
5. In case of unknown dead bodies, the police work for the first 72 hrs after death trying to identify the dead person. After this 72 hours police should conduct the postmortem examination as soon as possible so as to avoid decomposition changes which may hinder the determination of cause and manner of death.

The usual lacuna in the system at this part of

management is the delay in Police approaching the hospital/mortuary for postmortem examination. A much longer delay results in poor outcome of autopsy in terms of cause of death and sometimes manner of death.

Preservation of Non MLC Bodies from Outside Hospital

Many times Medical Superintendent / Mortuary Incharge / Chief Medical Officer may receive a request for preserving the bodies for natural deaths occurring outside of their Hospital. Generally such requests are due to the waiting for arrival of the relatives/next of kin from far off places for the last rites. Routinely, the practice of preserving non medicolegal cases is usually avoided due to space constrain at the cold storage facilities and possibility of attenders not turning up after preserving the dead body which will give rise to new problems of whom the custody of the dead body is to be given. But keeping a humanitarian aspect, the dead body can be preserved in Mortuary provided the Authorized officer has perused all the documents like Death certificate etc and assessed the genuineness of the request. Rest of the procedure will be same as mentioned above.

Conclusion

The errors which can occur at the Mortuary are the exchange of dead bodies, mutilation by rodents and decomposition due to improper temperature maintenance. All these can be avoided if proper guidelines are laid and followed for dead body handling and preservation. Hospital policy makers and administrators need to pay sincere attention for effective implementation of the guidelines for smooth functioning of the mortuary.

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