

SPOKANE COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE
Statement of Policy, Procedure and Practice

Policy Title: VIEWING OF BODIES AT HOSPITALS AND MEDICAL EXAMINER FACILITY

Policy:

There is no requirement for family to visually identify every decedent, as is unfortunately often portrayed on television, in movies, or in literature.

Family members are not allowed to view bodies at the Medical Examiner's Facility. Family members expressing a desire to view the body shall be directed to contact the funeral home or mortuary designated for the decedent to make viewing arrangements.

Hospital staff may allow for body viewing at their facilities, in non-homicide deaths, prior to transport to the Medical Examiner's facility.

In cases of hospital deaths when the Medical Examiner assumes jurisdiction, medical devices are not to be removed from the body. This is to allow for documentation of the correct use of these devices, and helps to establish the medical facts in any death.

Procedures and Practices:

Family viewing of bodies at the Medical Examiner's Office facility, it is not allowed. Remember that this exclusion does not mean that the family loses the ability to view the remains, only that this viewing is postponed.

The autopsy staff is unable to adequately prepare the body for viewing. Funeral homes are very experienced in this preparation, and provide the privacy family members need in these circumstances.

The only exception to this policy is in the case of remains, which are unidentified after complete examination and investigation. Rarely, as a last resort, a family member or acquaintance may be asked to make a visual identification. Families are asked to view a high-quality photograph of the face and/ or tattoo or birthmark or scar as a first step in this process.

In non-homicide cases, hospital staff may allow viewing of the body at their facility prior to transport to the ME's office.

In homicide-related deaths the Medical Examiner does not allow the body to be viewed whether in the hospital or at the scene of investigation. This is to protect any trace evidence that remains on the body.


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In many circumstances it is not possible for the Medical Examiner staff to determine if family members, or other individuals desiring to view the body, are potential suspects, witnesses, or have other involvement related to the investigation of the homicide.


As a corollary to the viewing policies, medical devices should not be removed from bodies, whether death occurred at the scene of investigation or hospital.

It is important to leave medical devices in position in order to document such things as endotracheal, and nasogastric tube position, and to have knowledge about whether needle puncture wounds are therapeutic or non-therapeutic.

This applies equally to bodies which are to be viewed by family members at the hospital. If there are mitigating circumstances relating to this requirement, a Medical Examiner is to be contacted to determine if any devices can be removed for family viewing.

 10/29/20
Sally Aiken, M.D. Date
Medical Examiner

 10-29-2020
John Howard, M.D. Date
Medical Examiner

 10/29/2020
Jennifer Nara, D.O. Date
Medical Examiner

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