



The Royal College of Pathologists  
*Pathology: the science behind the cure*

**Addition to *Guidelines on Autopsy Practice***

**Coronial autopsies and current practice:  
Accuracy of cause of death and tissue sampling**

**November 2007**

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<b>Comments</b>	This paper is an important addition to the College's <i>Guidelines on Autopsy Practice</i> .

In January 2007, a GMC Fitness to Practise (FTP) case (regarding Dr L Al-Alousi) was reported that has raised concerns over difficulties for pathologists in their coronial autopsy investigations. Specifically, because of the generally raised threshold for coronial permission to retain and examine histopathology samples, it has been suggested that the College's *Guidelines on Autopsy Practice* (2002 and 2005) are out of date and should be modified or even removed.

The GMC FTP Panel stated: "Professional bodies such as the police and coroners place reliance on the information provided by pathologists. The families of the deceased were entitled to an accurate diagnosis of the cause of death. It is therefore important that the conclusions stated in such reports can be verified".

The grounds for the concern are that 'best practice' is not now always possible, and that pathologists might be criticised for not performing coronial autopsies to the highest standards as indicated in the *Guidelines*, because coroners may refuse requests for histopathology investigations.

The 2000 version of *Guidelines on Autopsy Practice* states in paragraph 4.6.4: “Coroners’ autopsies should be reported to the same high standards recommended in the College’s existing guidelines, and now described in these *Guidelines*.”

The matter was discussed at the Specialty Advisory Committee (SAC) on Histopathology. It was agreed that:

- a) that *Guidelines on Autopsy Practice* would not be removed from the website
- b) that the *Guidelines* certainly need modification and amendment, but until the reform of the coronial system has progressed further, there is little point in a wholesale rewrite of the *Guidelines*
- c) a statement [i.e. this paper] will be inserted into the preamble for the *Guidelines*, to note the concerns, and to reinforce the professional advice around this issue.

It should also be noted that the original grounds for complaint that resulted in the GMC FTP case did not actually concern a pathologist not taking histopathology samples when such would have been useful; it concerned the interpretation of the samples that were taken.

The College re-emphasises paragraphs 4.6.2 and 9.6.2 that are already in the 2002 *Guidelines* – quoted again below for reference.

If the pathologist does not feel that he/she can satisfactorily fulfil his/her diagnostic duty in the case, then he/she should **either** decline the request to undertake the autopsy, and give the reasons for this decision, **or** perform the autopsy and indicate in the report the limitations imposed by the coroner and any consequences they might have had diagnostically.

#### ***Guidelines on Autopsy Practice (2002) paragraph 4.6.2***

“Limitations may be placed by the authorising Coroner in terms of the extent of organ examination, [e.g. following religious groups’ requests]... These must be observed, but if more extensive examination is deemed necessary by the pathologist, he or she should inform the Coroner of such and recommend further process. If the pathologist feels that those limitations will not permit proper pathological investigation, he or she should decline the request to perform the autopsy”.

#### ***Guidelines on Autopsy Practice (2002) paragraph 9.6.2***

“... Where discussion of the case with the Coroner does not permit [histopathology or other appropriate investigation] sampling which the pathologist feels necessary to give an accurate cause of death, the pathologist should make clear both that the cause of death may not be accurate and the reasons for that outcome. If in advance of the autopsy, discussion with a Coroner indicates to the pathologist that retention of material that may be relevant to the investigation will not be permitted, the pathologist should decline the request to perform the autopsy”.

**Professor Sebastian Lucas and Professor Jack Crane**

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