

Immediate Concerns- What To Do First

Emergencies

Call 911. Ask for police and medical emergency service.

Crisis Intervention

When a death occurs, emotions run high. If you have any reason to suspect that someone's grieving is out of control or may lead to physical harm, seek help immediately. You may obtain help by contacting the police. There are also non profit organizations which deal with crisis situations listed in the phone book under "crisis." The organizations can give you referrals to other services.

If you are concerned about someone's immediate well being, do not leave them alone. Do not let them drive. Carefully monitor their use of alcohol and of sedatives and other drugs. When someone arrives to assist you, make sure they are aware of your concerns and inform them of any drug or alcohol use.

Medical Examiners

If the death was expected and occurs at home, the family physician will be prepared to visit the home to deliver the official death pronouncement and to complete the death certificate. Then, contact the funeral home of your choice (see article on funeral arrangements).

If the death was unexpected, call the county medical examiner or the police. The county medical examiner will take charge of the body. Do not move the body unless it is in a dangerous spot. The county medical examiner or police will release the body to the funeral home.

Autopsy

The opening and examination of the body are normally ordered by the medical examiner in cases of death which occurred unexpectedly or when there was no on-going care by a physician. This is necessary to determine the exact cause of death and often aids in medical research. Once completed and the body is clothed, it should not be apparent that there has been an autopsy.

What if You are Traveling?

What if death occurs in a public place or while traveling? Call the police. The deceased will be transported to a hospital where a physician or medical examiner will be summoned. Then notify a funeral director of the death. If you are traveling in the United States, ask a local funeral director to contact the funeral director in your hometown whom you wish to use. The two funeral directors will arrange to have the deceased transported. If you are traveling outside the United States you should contact the nearest U.S. Embassy for assistance.

Organ Donations

You may be asked to donate all or some of the deceased's organs and tissues for transplantation, medical research, or education. The deceased may have made that decision for you by signing a donor card or indicating so in a will. Most states, including Washington, have donor cards that can be attached to a driver's license.

If the deceased has named a donee, contact that organization and make certain that it will accept a donation. Otherwise, any guardian or health care attorney-in-fact, the surviving spouse, or other listed relations may make the decision under the Washington Uniform Anatomical Gifts Act. If you want to know who would be interested in a donation, contact the Northwest Organ Procurement Agency (see Page 41).

The decision to donate organs must be made quickly since organs deteriorate quickly. Donations of heart, lungs, liver, pancreas, and kidneys must be made within 12 hours of death and are usually coordinated in the hospital with the agency while the person is alive. Donations of tissue, eyes, bones, skin, and heart valves usually must be made within 24 hours of death. The hospital will discuss organ donorship with the family if death appears imminent. You may be able to donate tissues even though the deceased was considered too old or disease-ridden to donate organs.

It should cost nothing to make a donation. All expenses should be paid by the organ procurement organization.

Making a donation should not delay the funeral. Nor should it prevent having an open casket since the deceased is usually not disfigured by a donation.