

Coronial Investigations explained

Emergency Department factsheets



This factsheet explains the role of the coroner when someone dies suddenly, and how family can access further information about a coronial investigation.

What is the role of the coroner?

The coroner is a magistrate who is responsible for investigating 'reportable' deaths (those deaths legally required to be reported to a coroner in Queensland). Many sudden and unexpected deaths that occur in an Emergency Department are 'reportable' deaths.

The coroner needs to be informed when someone dies if:

- the cause of death is unknown
- the identity of the person is unknown
- the death was violent or unnatural, such as accidents, falls or suicides
- the death is suspicious
- the death occurred in care, custody or as a result of police operations
- the death was related to health care
- a 'cause of death' certificate has not been issued and is not likely to be issued.

Reportable deaths' are usually reported to the coroner by a Police officer or medical practitioner. Once notified, the coroner will decide whether a coronial investigation is required.

What is a coronial investigation?

A coronial investigation is the process undertaken by the coroner to find out:

- the identity of the person
- when, where and how they died
- the medical cause of death.

As part of the investigation the coroner may order that a post mortem examination (autopsy) be performed. An autopsy provides detailed information about the person's health and gives

an understanding of the various factors which may have contributed to their death.

An autopsy is performed by a doctor, either a Pathologist or government medical officer and great care is taken to preserve the dignity of the deceased person during the procedure.

Family and cultural concerns are considered by the coroner before ordering an autopsy. Should you have objections to an internal autopsy examination, you should inform the coroner as soon as possible. You can raise your concerns with the doctor at the hospital, the Police, the counsellors at Coronial Family Services or by contacting the coroners court directly.

What is the role of the Police?

The role of the Police is to act on behalf of the coroner after a doctor notifies the coroner about a 'reportable' death.

The Police will come to the hospital and may:

- Collect initial information from family or friends present at the hospital.
- Arrange a formal identification by staff, a relative or close friend of the person who has died.
- Arrange for the deceased person's body to be transported to the nearest government mortuary. In Brisbane this is Queensland Health Forensic and Scientific Services in Coopers Plains. In regional areas, it is usually the local hospital.

When can I arrange a funeral?

You may begin making plans for a funeral at any time after your loved one has died, even if a coronial investigation is being conducted.

It is recommended that you speak with your appointed funeral director regarding release of your loved one, prior to making firm plans.

Once the autopsy is complete and the coroner is satisfied it is not necessary to retain your loved ones body for further examination or tests, the appointed funeral director can arrange release.

If family or friends are unable to make funeral arrangements or cover costs, they may be eligible for Queensland government assistance. An application for 'Funeral Assistance' can be made by contacting your local courthouse or coroners court.

How can I find out the results of the coronial investigation?

In Brisbane, information about a coronial investigation may be provided to family members by the counsellors at Coronial Family Services. A counsellor may make contact with the next of kin by phone or in writing to provide support and information about the coronial process. This may include information about the cause of death and release process.

Once the coronial investigation is complete, the coroner will make a written report of the cause of death findings, which will be sent to the family.

Outside Brisbane, telephone support and counselling is also available to families of people whose death is being investigated by the coroner. For more information contact Coronial Family Services or the local coroners court:

Coronial Family Services

Phone: 3096 2794 (South East QLD)
Free call: 1800 449 171 (outside Sth East QLD)
Email: fss.counsellors@health.qld.gov.au

Coroners Court Greater Brisbane

GPO Box 1649
BRISBANE QLD 4001
Phone: 3239 6193
Phone: 1300 304 605 (Statewide)
Email: state.coroner@justice.qld.gov.au
Website: courts.qld.gov.au/129.htm

For information about your local coroner:
Contact the nearest courthouse or visit the website for a list of Magistrates Courts.
Website: courts.qld.gov.au

How can I get a copy of the death certificate?

You can get a copy of the death certificate by applying to the Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages. Your Funeral Director will usually help you to do this.

After the autopsy is completed, a form showing the cause of death will be forwarded to the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. Once this happens the death is officially registered and a death certificate will be issued.

In some cases, the cause of death may not be determined until further test results are known, sometimes many months later. In these cases, an interim death certificate is issued and will be updated once the Registry is advised of the final cause of death. The updated cause of death certificate can be obtained free of charge if you send the interim certificate back to the Registry.

To apply for a Death Certificate:
Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages
PO Box 15188
City East QLD 4002
Phone: 1300 366 430
Email: bdm-mail@justice.qld.gov.au
Website: qld.gov.au/law/births-deaths-marriages-and-divorces/

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.