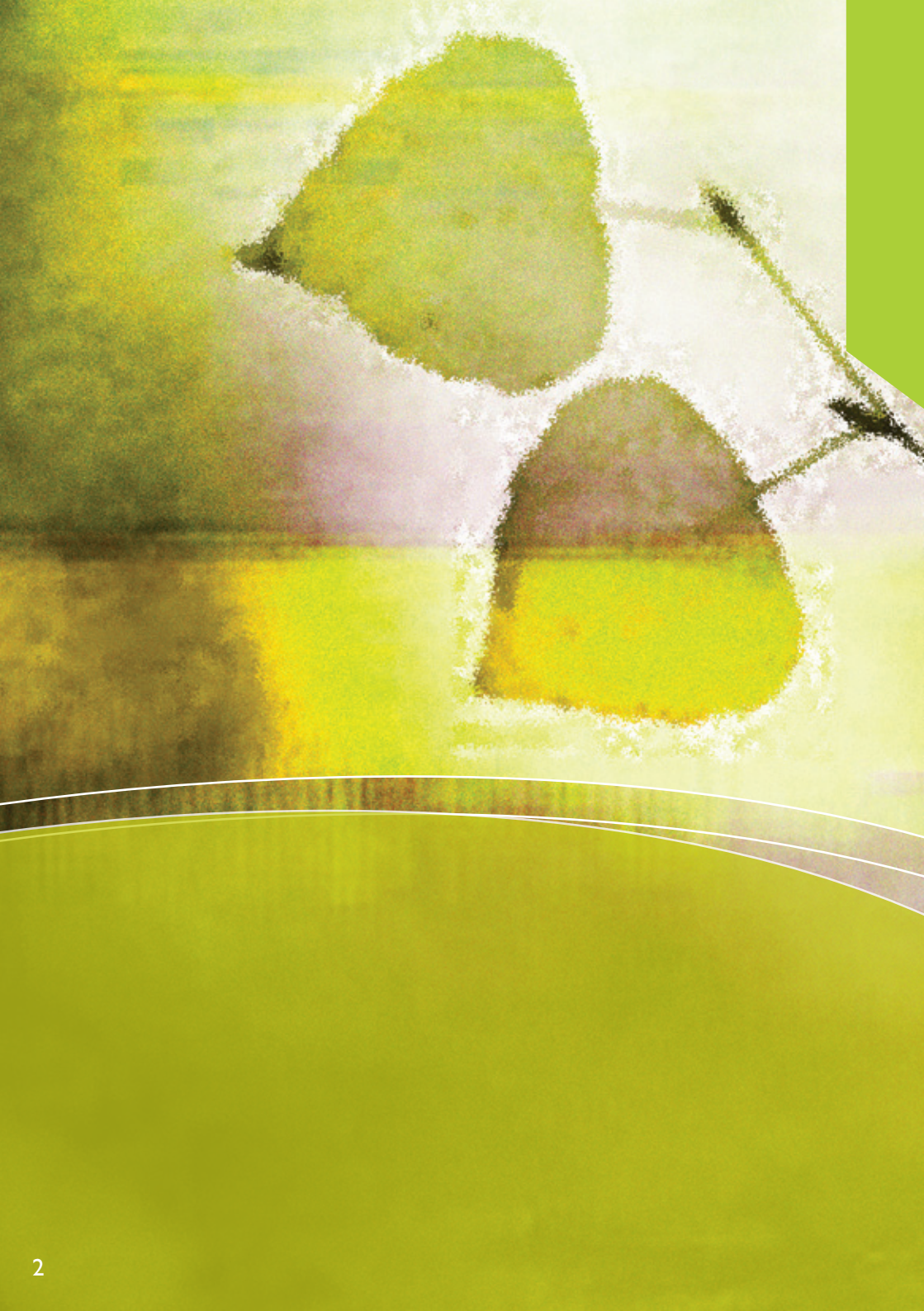


Autopsy at the University Hospitals Leuven

Information on forensic investigation of
unexpected death



The sudden loss of a loved one is very painful and gives rise to a lot of questions.

You want to say goodbye in peace to the person who has died. Judicial investigation may seem to prevent this and cause even more confusion. What is going to happen? Why? What are all these investigations for? Why does it take so long? Is certain information being withheld?

This brochure tries to give an answer to some of these questions, although we are well aware that many questions remain unanswered. In the brochure you can find addresses of organizations you can turn to for further guidance.

We do hope this brochure will be an aid to guide you through this difficult period of confusion and distress.

WHY IS A FORENSIC INVESTIGATION NECESSARY?

When someone passes away under uncertain circumstances or even when the cause of death is unclear, the public prosecution office is informed. When someone dies due to violence, the public prosecution office obviously needs to be involved and the public prosecutor will always set up a forensic investigation.

An examining magistrate may coordinate the investigation if requested to do so by the public prosecutor.

The true cause of death can only be established by examining all the evidence. In addition to the investigation carried out by the police force, the public prosecutor will therefore often call on experts such as a forensic physician or a traffic expert.

The results of these investigations are also of great importance to the relatives of the deceased, giving them a better understanding of exactly what happened.

HOW DOES A FORENSIC INVESTIGATION PROCEED?

The public prosecutor or examining magistrate coordinates the investigation. The police try to establish the circumstances of death by performing interviews, searching the area, etc. The medical examiner examines the body. He/she may perform an external or an internal examination (autopsy). The body of the deceased will be held at the disposal of the public prosecutor for the time necessary to complete the investigation. This means that the municipal officer will not issue a burial permit until all necessary examinations have been performed. The forensic investigation continues until all the required information has been collected.

WHAT IS AN EXTERNAL EXAMINATION OF THE BODY?

Often a medical examiner is summoned to perform a first examination of the body. This is what is called an external examination. Usually this examination is performed on the spot, but sometimes, due to circumstances, the external investigation is performed at the hospital or funeral home and includes a full clinical examination of the body, looking for a potential cause of death. Attention is also paid to a number of phenomena which provide evidence of the time of death. It is often impossible to define the cause of death by external examination alone. The examining magistrate responsible for the investigation may then decide to have an autopsy performed. In cases of (possible) felony, an autopsy is standard procedure.

WHAT IS AN AUTOPSY?

An autopsy is the internal investigation of a body, and can be compared with detailed surgery. The medical examiner examines the trunk and head of the deceased and, if necessary, the back and limbs are examined as well. This elaborate investigation may take several hours. Afterwards the body will be repaired in the same way as after surgery. The mortuary assistants take care of the body: they clean, dress and lay out the deceased.

Additional expert investigation is often necessary, which may take weeks or even months to complete and thus delays the final outcome. It is common for a microscopic tissue examination to be performed. Tissue is taken from several organs to be examined under the microscope in a specialized laboratory in order to trace drugs, toxic substances or medication in the blood: such procedures are known as biopsies.

It is important to perform as comprehensive an examination as possible. However, this will be done with due respect for the deceased person and his or her relatives. The mortuary assistants will do their utmost to take care of the body and to lay out the deceased.

WHERE IS THE AUTOPSY PERFORMED?

In the district of Leuven autopsies are performed by one of the medical examiners attached to the University Hospital Gasthuisberg. At this location autopsies can be performed with the utmost thoroughness and sensitivity. In most cases, an undertaker who has been summoned by an examining magistrate will therefore transfer the body to the Gasthuisberg mortuary, where the autopsy will take place. The relatives' preference concerning the undertaker will be taken into consideration if possible.

WHEN WILL THE BODY BE RELEASED?

For the family, the release of the body means that they can start to make the arrangements for the funeral. Usually the body is released by the examining magistrate within two to three days. In exceptional cases this may take longer (e.g. problems concerning the identity of the deceased). On rare occasions, the magistrate may decide to give permission for burial only and to forbid cremation. This will only occur when cremation might compromise further investigation. For further burial arrangements, relatives can use the services of a funeral home of their own choice. The body of their loved one can be transported to any funeral home.

HOW IS THE BODY IDENTIFIED?

In most cases the identity of the deceased is obvious, but sometimes relatives may be asked to identify a body. If identification from external appearance is no longer possible, for instance in the event of severe mutilation or if death occurred some time ago, it may take several days or weeks to identify the deceased person. This is because as much information as possible needs to be collected so that it can be compared with what is discovered about the body. Although it is a painful process, the relatives will be asked to help. A forensic laboratory will be summoned to investigate finger prints and a forensic dentist will be asked to perform a full dental examination. Sometimes it is even necessary to resort to comparative DNA investigation (examining genetic material), in order to compare the DNA profile of the deceased with those of relatives.

Proper identification is definitely essential both for the investigation and for the relatives. Physical appearance and personal belongings are important clues in the identification procedure, but are not always conclusive.

We are aware of the agonizing uncertainty that will be experienced during this period, and hope that the relatives will understand the reasons why these procedures can take time.

PAYING RESPECTS: WHEN AND WHERE?

You will always be able to pay your last respects to your loved one. Sometimes it is not possible to visit before the autopsy, e.g. in case of severe injuries or murder, due to the possibility of evidence becoming contaminated. After the autopsy, the injuries can be treated. The only circumstances under which it will be difficult to pay your respects are in the event of mutilation or if death took place some time ago. In this case we may discourage you from doing so, but this will always be discussed.

You can pay your respects at any time during mortuary visiting hours. It is quite normal to say goodbye to the deceased, and will help you to come to terms with the sudden loss. If requested, you can contact the responsible of the Aid for Victims of the police or the Assistant of Justice of the Aid to Victims Service.

Feel free to discuss any personal requests you may have regarding the laying out of your loved one (for example the use of certain clothes or a particular cuddly toy) with the mortuary assistant or undertaker.

WHAT HAPPENS TO CLOTHES AND OTHER PERSONAL BELONGINGS?

Sometimes clothes and other personal belongings are held for investigation. Afterwards they may be returned to the relatives by the Aid to Victims Service of the Public Prosecution Office, provided permission to do so is given by Court. All personal belongings that stay with the body can be collected from the hospital or the mortuary.

HOW LONG DOES THE ACTUAL FORENSIC INVESTIGATION TAKE?

This is hard to say. Some examinations take a few months, while others may take several years. For any further information regarding the investigation's progress, access to the judicial file, etc., you can contact the Aid to Victims Service of the Public Prosecution Office.

The brochure is an initiative of the Forensic Medicine Department, the Social Work Service and the Mortuary of the University Hospitals Leuven, in cooperation with the Public Prosecution Office (Aid to Victims Service).

USEFUL INFORMATION

University Hospitals Leuven Mortuary
campus Gasthuisberg
Herestraat 49
3000 Leuven

Go to the main entrance (entrance East), follow the Brown street, go to gate 3 until you reach the second floor, follow signs for 'MORTUARIUM'.
Tel. 016 34 46 60

Visiting hours:

- Every day (including weekends and holidays) from 2 to 5 pm
- You have to call first to make an appointment:
tel. +32 16 34 46 60

AID FOR VICTIMS SERVICE

More information: www.vlaanderen.be/slachtofferonthaal

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