

HARMONISATION OF MEDICO-LEGAL AUTOPSY RULES IN EU -
RECOMMENDATION No. R (99) 3
Part 4

Principle VI - Autopsy report

1. The autopsy report is as important as the autopsy itself, as the latter is of little value if the findings and opinions of the medico-legal expert are not communicated in a clear, accurate and permanent document. The autopsy report should be an integral part of the autopsy procedure and be drafted carefully.

2. The report should therefore be:

- a. full, detailed, comprehensive and objective;
- b. clear and comprehensible not only to other doctors, but also to non-medical readers;
- c. written in a logical sequence, well-structured and easy to refer to in various sections of the report;
- d. be in a legible and permanent form, with hard paper copy even if it is retained in electronic storage;
- e. be written in a discursive "essay" style;

3. When drafting an autopsy report, the following minimum content should be included:

- a. legal preface to fulfill statutory requirements, if needed;
- b. serial number, computer retrieval coding and International Classification of Disease Code (ICD) code;
- c. full personal details of deceased (including name, age, sex, address and occupation) unless unidentified;
- d. date, place and time of death, where known;
- e. date, place and time of autopsy;
- f. name, qualifications and status of medico-legal expert(s);
- g. persons present at the autopsy and their function;
- h. name of the authority commissioning the autopsy;
- i. person(s) identifying the body to the medico-legal expert;
- j. name and address of the medical attendant of the deceased;
- k. a synopsis of the history and circumstances of the death, as given to the medico-legal expert by the police, judges, relatives or other persons, as well as information contained in the file, where available;
- l. description of the scene of death, if attended by the medico-legal expert; reference should be made to the provisions contained in Principle I above;
- m. external examination; reference should be made to the provisions of Principle V above;
- n. internal examination by anatomic systems, together with a comment on every organ. Reference should be made to the provisions of Principle V above;
- o. a list of all samples retained for toxicology, genetic identification, histology, microbiology and other investigations should be included; all such specimens should be identified and attested by the medico-legal expert according to the legal system of the state concerned, for continuity of evidence;
- p. results of ancillary investigations, such as radiology, odontology, entomology and anthropology should be included, when such results are available;
- q. one of the most important parts of the autopsy report is the evaluation of the significance of the accumulated results by the medico-legal expert. After termination of the autopsy, evaluation is usually provisional because later findings and later knowledge of other circumstantial facts can necessitate alteration and modification. Medico-legal experts must interpret the overall findings so that the maximum information and opinion can be offered. Also questions that have not been raised by the competent authority must be addressed if they could be of significance;
- r. based on the final interpretation, the cause of death (in the International Classification of Disease)

should be given. Where several alternatives for the cause of death exist and the facts do not allow a differentiation between them, the medico-legal expert should describe the alternatives and, if possible, rank them in order of probability. If this is not possible, then the cause of death should be certified as "Unascertained";

s. the report should be finally checked, dated and signed by the medico-legal expert(s).

4. The date of the autopsy and the date of the provisional report should never be more than a day or two apart. The date of the autopsy and the date of the final report should be as close together as possible.