

Care of the dying

There is no stage when nothing more can be done to help a patient. We may be unable to prevent the person from dying, but there remains the task of ensuring that the patient is protected from unnecessary suffering and pain, that he has people around to care for him, and that his dignity as a human being is preserved and respected. If the patient is obviously dying and you believe that death is inevitable, you should make sure that the person remains tranquil in mind and in body during the period of dying. Comfort, companionship, compassion, and the complete relief both of mental and physical suffering, should be the aims. If slight pain is present, it must be relieved by giving simple painkillers. If the patient is suffering from severe pain then morphine is appropriate. Morphine has the added benefit of relieving anxiety. In the event of mental distress, confusion, or behavioural problems consider sedation or tranquillisers. Get **RADIO MEDICAL ADVICE**.

Signs of death

Never consider anyone to be dead until you and others agree that:

- breathing has stopped. Listen with your ear right over the nose and mouth. You should feel no air coming out and should see no chest and abdominal movement. A mirror held in front of the nose and mouth will be misted by the moisture in the exhaled breath in life, but no misting will occur in death.
- the heart has stopped. No pulse will be felt and no heart sounds will be heard. Put your ear on the left side of the chest near the nipple and listen carefully. If you are not sure what to listen for, listen to the left chest of a living person first. To test that the circulation has stopped, tie a piece of string tightly around a finger. In life the finger becomes bluish, but in death it remains white. Slight pressure on the finger nail or lip in life will cause the area to become pale and when the pressure is released the colour is regained. In death, this will not occur.
- the person looks dead. The eyes become dull and the skin pale. The pupils are large and shining a bright light into the eyes does not make the pupils get smaller.

While none of the signs described above are themselves infallible, taken together there is usually little difficulty in coming to a decision.

Mistaken death – a warning

A person who has taken large doses of certain drugs, usually sedatives or tranquillisers, or who is suffering from hypothermia may look dead, but may still be alive. Mistakes have been made. Check carefully for shallow breathing, for a pulse, for heart sounds, as described above. If you are aware of the possibilities for error you are less likely to make a mistake. The circumstances surrounding the death may help you to decide whether drug overdose or hypothermia may be possibilities.

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Signs of death

Cause of death

Procedure after death

Disposal of the body

Cause of death

It is important to try to establish the reasons for death. Causes of death can be ascribed to two main groups:

- natural causes such as illnesses;
- injuries, which may be accidental or non-accidental.

If the person has been ill on board, records of the nature and progress of illness and of the treatment given will have been made. These records should be carefully preserved in case any further enquiries are necessary. Similarly, in case of injuries, the circumstances of the incident which led to injury or injuries should be investigated and recorded. The notes made of the investigations, together with the medical records, should be carefully preserved. It must always be remembered that medico-legal enquiries will subsequently be necessary even when there are, at the time, no apparent criminal or suspicious circumstances surrounding a death. If the circumstances of death are unusual, sudden or unknown, or if there is any suspicion of criminal intent, there must be a post-mortem examination by a pathologist.

Procedure after death

It is usually possible to retain the body until it can be examined by a pathologist at a port. Every effort must be made to retain and preserve the body until the next port of call can be reached. It is vital that as much evidence of what happened is gathered and preserved:

- use a camera to take photographs which might illustrate how the death occurred, this will be helpful in any investigation.
- *Clothing.* Strip the body of all clothing, if possible without tearing or cutting it. Make a brief description of each article and note any initials or names on the garments. Any papers, wallet, money or other articles should be noted on the list. Any articles which are wet should be dried, but not laundered, and should then be put into plastic bags, sealed, labelled, and kept in a safe place for handing over to the British Consul, police or other authorities at the next port. When handing over clothing and other articles, check each item against the list and get a receipt from the person to whom they are delivered. Any other possessions of the deceased should be treated similarly. If there is going to be little delay before reaching port, leave everything undisturbed.
- examine the body. If it is absolutely essential to bury the body before it is examined by a pathologist examine the body carefully (photographs are very helpful) and record the following data:
 - race;
 - skin colour;
 - approximate age;
 - height – straighten out the body with the legs fully extended. Make two marks on the deck, one in line with the heels, the other in line with the top of the head. Measure and record the distance between the lines;
 - development of the body – note whether fat, thin, wasted, muscular etc.;
 - inspect the head and face – record the length and colour of the hair; note the eyebrows and describe facial hair. The complexion should be described (for example, sunburned; pale; florid; sallow). Record the colour of the eyes and the shape of the nose. Open mouth and examine the teeth, noting whether they are sound, decayed, or missing. Dentures should be removed, cleaned and placed with the other articles kept for future examination;
 - inspect the rest of the body – record all birthmarks, moles, scars, or deformities from injuries. Note the exact position of all scars and describe their length and width. A diagram will help. Note whether circumcised or not. Vaccination scars should be noted. Tattoos

should be described and any words or letters noted. Record the size, position, general appearance, and colour of such tattoos. Wounds and bruises should be noted. You should try to decide whether they could explain the death. Note the exact position, depth and dimensions of all wounds. Describe the character of the wounds – clean cuts as from a knife, or ragged tears, or bullet wounds. Note any skin blackening or singeing of clothing around the entrance bullet wound. Look for an exit wound where the bullet left the body – this is always bigger than the entry wound. Feel under the skin for a bullet which may be lodged there and note the position. Look carefully for signs of bruising round wounds or if there is any escape of blood from the wound as shown by blood clots, blood staining of the surrounding skin, by blood on the clothing or by blood in the area where the body was found. This will help to distinguish injuries caused during life (which bleed) from those caused after death (which do not bleed). Note also any broken bones. External signs of disease such as boils, ulcers, varicose veins, or skin rashes, should be recorded.

- records. Remember to have all your observational notes countersigned, and to make all appropriate entries in the official log book.

Disposal of the body

Retention for post-mortem examination

Whenever possible a body should be retained for post-mortem examination or for burial ashore. For the sake of the deceased person's relatives and to preserve the body in the best possible condition, if there is going to be any delay in reaching port, thoroughly wash and dry the body all over. Comb out and part the hair and give attention to finger nails. Straighten the arms and legs and interlock the fingers over the thighs. Tie the ankles together to keep the feet perpendicular. Empty the bladder by firm pressure over the lower abdomen. The body should then be put into a body bag and kept in a refrigerator or cold store which will have to be set aside for the purpose. The aim is to store the body at approximately 4°C, it should not be frozen. An alternative, if near port, is to lay the naked body on ice in a bath and to cover the body with lots of ice.

Burial at sea

Only in the most exceptional circumstances (and where there is no suspicion of foul play) might it be appropriate to proceed directly to dispose of the body at sea. Next of kin and/or the seafarer's employing company should always be consulted where possible and advice should be sought on an appropriate committal service or procedure. For burial at sea it is not necessary to do more than to lay the body on a flat surface, straighten the legs and arms and interlock the fingers over the thighs. The hair should be brushed off the forehead, the face washed, and the jaw secured by passing a bandage under the chin and over the top of the head, where it may be tied or clipped. The body should be sewn into a shroud.

Bear in mind that the shroud needs to be made of a very strong material and weighted sufficiently to ensure the rapid sinking and permanent submersion of the body. There should be three or four slits or openings in the material to allow the gases of decomposition to escape and prevent flotation due to trapped air.

Burial should not take place in soundings in any part of the world.

After preparation the body should be placed upon an improvised platform resting on the ship's side rail and a suitable trestle or other support, covered by an ensign, secured to the inboard edge of the platform. Wooden blocks screwed under the platform and resting against the ship's side rail will prevent the platform sliding outboard when the inboard end is raised to allow the body to slide from under the flag into the sea. It is very important to ensure that the whole operation proceeds smoothly and respectfully without unseemly mishaps. If the ship is small and there is a heavy sea, precautions must be taken to ensure that the body will not be prematurely lost and will not fail to drop cleanly into the sea at the right moment. This may warrant fastening guide rails on the platform. The seafarers allocated to perform the disposal must be carefully briefed. At the words of the Committal, and on receipt of a discreet signal, they must raise the inboard end of the platform to allow the body to slide from under the ensign into the sea.

Record the event in the official log book with the exact time and position of burial.

