

Immediately after the death:
Police & coronial
procedures

Booklet 1

Help in coping:

When someone dies in a road accident

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Kristine Alilunas Rodgers 1999, 2000

Australian Capital Territory Magistrates Court, Canberra, Australia

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In memory of Colin Rodgers. To all those who have died on Canberra's roads. For all those bereaved by a road accident in Canberra, and for those helping them.

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SOME IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Consideration of immediate family

Viewing at morgue and post-mortem

This booklet contains important information about your entitlements in relation to coronial and police procedures. If you wish to:

- **request access at the morgue** to the body of the person who died – to view the person's body or to carry out certain religious practices – before the post-mortem is carried out
- **object to a post-mortem**
- **be present or represented at the post-mortem**
- **have a further post-mortem conducted**

you will need to request permission from the coroner **very quickly**, as the post-mortem is usually conducted soon after the death.

If this applies to you:

- > see pages **8–12** for more information
- contact the Coroner's Officer (office or mobile phone number) or the investigating police officer (> see *Booklet 8*).

Taking care of yourself & getting assistance

- Take care if operating machinery or equipment. It is wise to avoid driving.
- Make an appointment with a doctor if you were in the accident and had any injuries (even minor) or if you are not coping.
- If you or other family members need help in coping, contact the Coronial Support Service (> see leaflet enclosed in this kit).

FOREWORD

This booklet tells you what the ACT coronial system is and how it operates.

Most people, even lawyers, have no experience of the system until they suffer the personal loss of a family member whose death is reported to the coroner.

The booklet explains what happens, why and what you can ask for. Along with the other booklets in the kit, it is a most useful guide for bereaved people and those who wish to help them.

RON CAHILL
ACT CHIEF CORONER

INTRODUCTION

How can this booklet help you?

When a person dies as the result of an accident (or in certain other circumstances), the death is reported to a coroner. The coroner must hold an inquest (investigation) to find out the manner and cause of the death.

This often involves both a post-mortem examination of the body of the person who died, in order to find out the medical cause of death, and a police investigation of the circumstances of the accident.

When the investigation is completed, the coroner will review the evidence and determine the cause and manner of the death. In the case of an accident, this usually involves a coronial hearing (commonly called an ‘inquest’), often some months or more after the death.

This is likely to be your first experience of the coronial system; you may know very little about how it works, what is expected of you and what your entitlements are. You may feel overwhelmed by an unfamiliar system, and have many concerns and questions – and this at a time of intense grief.

This booklet aims to help you to understand how the coronial system operates and your rights. It describes some of the coronial and police procedures that will be carried out soon after the person has died.

Many of these procedures are underpinned by the *Coroners Act 1997* (ACT). This Act recognises that family members will be affected by the death and by the investigation, and enables you to participate in some aspects of the coronial process.

How to use this booklet

This booklet makes reference to sections of the *Coroners Act 1997* (ACT). Word-for-word quotations from the Act are enclosed in ‘ ’; otherwise, references to the Act are not in the exact wording of the Act.

> See the *Glossary* at the end of this booklet for definitions of terms you may not know.

> See *Chapter 4* for leads to information contained in other booklets of this kit.

> See also the chart ‘Coronial & other procedures following a fatal road accident’ enclosed in this kit.

1 OVERVIEW & NOTIFICATION

1 OVERVIEW OF POLICE & CORONIAL PROCEDURES

Below are some of the police and coronial procedures that take place soon after the death. (NOTE: The order and timing of your contacts with police may vary, depending on circumstances.)

Some of these procedures will take place behind the scenes and you will probably not be aware of them:

- pronouncing life extinct** (either by a doctor in hospital or by a government medical officer at the scene of the accident)
- reporting the death to the coroner**
- coroner's control of the person's body**
- removal of the person's body to the morgue** (forensic medical centre)
- police investigation** of the accident on behalf of the coroner and, later on, **report** to the coroner.

Your contacts with the police are likely to have already involved some or all of the procedures listed below:

- being **notified** of the person's death
- making a **formal identification** of the person's body
- giving information to the police** about the person who died and the circumstances of the death
- personal items of value** of the deceased being **returned** by police
- giving or refusing **permission** for the **person's name** to be **released to the media**
- getting information about procedures** (removal of the person's body; post-mortem examination).

A little later on, procedures that may involve you (or another family member or your representative) may include:

- post-mortem examination** of the person's body at the morgue
- release of the person's body for burial or cremation**
- return of other personal items** (and **clothing**, in some circumstances)
- getting information about the **provisional cause of death**
- dealing with the **motor vehicle** (where relevant).

2 NOTIFICATION OF THE PERSON'S DEATH

If you did not already learn of the death from hospital staff, or you were not with the person who died at the scene of the accident or in hospital, it is the police's responsibility to notify the next of kin of the death as soon as practicable.

If you live in the ACT, this will be done in person by a police officer. This police officer may not be the investigating police officer, who would contact you about the identification of the deceased and circumstances of the death.

If you live elsewhere in Australia, the ACT police contact the police station nearest to you. If you live outside of Australia, the ACT police contact Interpol or a diplomatic mission, who in turn contact local police.

If you have any questions

A police officer who contacts you should give you a card with his or her name and contact information. You should feel free to contact this officer, or the Coroner's Officer, if you have any questions.

2 PROCEDURES CONCERNING THE BODY OF THE PERSON WHO DIED

This chapter describes police and coronial procedures concerning the body of the person who died. These procedures take place as soon as practicable after the person's death. The order and timing of your contacts with police may vary, depending on circumstances.

1 IDENTIFICATION OF THE PERSON'S BODY

To enable the coroner to establish the identity of the person who died, it is an official requirement that someone who knew the deceased identify his or her body to the police. Although a relative usually identifies the deceased, a neighbour, colleague or friend can also fulfil this requirement. There is a form of identification to sign.

The identification may have been made at the scene of the accident, at the hospital (if the person died there or en route) or at the morgue. Sometimes the person's body cannot be identified visually. In this case, fingerprints or dental records may be required.

Identification is a formal procedure; your access to the person's body may be limited by the restrictions discussed below.

2 RESTRICTIONS ON ACCESS

Certain requirements of the coronial system are likely to limit the amount of access you may have to the person's body before it is released from the coroner's control.

Coroner's control of the person's body

Where a person's death is required to be investigated by the coroner, the coroner has control of the person's body until the coroner releases it for burial or cremation (section 15, Coroners Act).

Restrictions on touching

Touching the person's body may not be allowed because it may influence the results of the post-mortem examination (> see below, *Post-mortem examination*) – but if you wish to, ask. If formal identification takes place at the morgue, it is usually done in the viewing room, behind a glass partition.

Preserving evidence

Police, acting on behalf of the coroner, are concerned to preserve the scene of the accident that led to the death (and the scene of death if the person did not die at the scene of the accident) for any possible evidence concerning the manner and cause of death (coroner may restrict access to scene of death and event – section 65, Coroners Act).

If the person died in hospital, sometimes tubes may be left in place until the police arrive. Clothing and personal belongings may sometimes be retained (coroner may inspect and retain seized things – section 67, Coroners Act).

Removal of the person's body to morgue

Acting on behalf of the coroner, the police arrange for the body of the person to be taken to the forensic medical centre (morgue).

Limited access for viewing

Apart from formal identification, viewing at the morgue is not encouraged. It is preferred that you view or spend time with the person's body at the funeral director's (after the post-mortem has been carried out and the body has been released from the coroner's control (> see below, *Release of the person's body for burial or cremation*). But if in doubt, ask.

Requests for access for viewing

There may be circumstances where you wish very much to ask to see the person's body at the morgue.

For example, if you formally identified the person's body at the scene of the accident, you may not have had much privacy or much time to spend with them. Or other family members may not have had a chance to see the person who died. Or the accident may have happened at the beginning of a weekend, in which case the release of the person's body may be delayed until the next working day.

Or you may wish to request access to the person's body to carry out certain religious practices before the post-mortem is performed (for example, washing the body, anointing the body with oil, saying prayers).

If you or another family member wish very strongly to request access to the person's body at the morgue (before the post-mortem examination), then you may ask for this (> see also below, *Consideration of immediate family*). You may ask either the investigating police officer or the Coroner's Officer.

When it is not advisable to have a full viewing

In some cases, if injuries are severe, only a portion of the person's body may be able to be viewed. Or perhaps the person's body will be completely covered and you can only touch it or hold it through the covering, or spend time near it. The investigating police officer would alert you in these circumstances. > See also *Preparing for a viewing* in *Booklet 2*.

Can I still make arrangements for the funeral?

During this time, you can begin to prepare funeral arrangements (> see *Booklet 2*); it is up to you to contact a funeral director. You will also be able to make arrangements for viewing the person's body with the funeral director. It may be unwise, though, to set a firm date for the funeral until you learn that the coroner has released the person's body (> see below, *Release of the person's body for burial or cremation*).

3 CONSIDERATION OF IMMEDIATE FAMILY

Viewing, inspection of the scene and presence at post-mortem

There is some scope for the needs of close family members to be considered.

What am I entitled to request?

Immediate family members may ask the coroner to:

- allow them to **view the body of the deceased** (i.e. at the morgue)
- allow them to **inspect the scene of the death or accident**
- allow them to **be present (or represented) at the post-mortem**
- have a **further post-mortem** conducted

(section 23, Coroners Act) (> see also below, *Post-mortem examination*).

You can make these requests yourself, or your representative can ask on your behalf. If permission is granted, you can do these things yourself, or your representative can do them for you. Your representative might be your doctor or medical specialist, solicitor, minister of religion, etc., as the case may be.

Post-mortems are usually conducted soon after the death. If you wish to request permission from the coroner, call the Coroner's Officer immediately.

What if the coroner refuses my request?

The coroner may refuse to give an authorisation for one of the above requests on the grounds that it is not in the public interest or the interests of justice. If so, the coroner must give you his or her refusal in writing, and an explanation (section 23, Coroners Act).

If this happens, you can ask the Chief Coroner (in writing and stating your reasons) for the decision to be reconsidered. There is no guarantee the coroner will change his or her decision, but the Chief Coroner must notify you of any comments the coroner makes in response to your request (section 24, Coroners Act).

4 POST-MORTEM EXAMINATION OF THE PERSON'S BODY

What is a post-mortem?

If you do not want to know more about the post-mortem, you should skip this section.

A post-mortem is a medical examination of the deceased person's body by a doctor (usually a pathologist) to find out the medical cause of death. It is also called an autopsy.

Non-intrusive elements of a post-mortem include an examination of the outside of the body and weighing. In certain cases photographs and x-rays may be taken.

A full three-cavity autopsy is a surgical operation to examine the organs inside the head, chest and abdomen. The major organs are examined; if not required for further examination or analysis, they are returned to the person's body. The incisions are sewn back up and the appearance of the person's body is restored.

Tissue may be taken for further examination or analysis. Any tissue not retained for possible future analysis is medically incinerated (in the same manner as surgical tissue removed during an operation). ('Tissue' may include whole organs or specimens, or samples of blood or other fluids.)

A full autopsy may not be carried out if HIV-AIDS or hepatitis B or C are suspected.

Cutting and destruction of clothing

> See *Personal items, documents & clothing* in *Chapter 3*.

Why is a post-mortem carried out?

The post-mortem will help the coroner (and you) to understand how the person died. Its aim is to determine the nature and extent of injuries and the medical cause and manner of death. A full post-mortem may uncover a medical condition or injuries that are not otherwise apparent. Information from the post-mortem, along with other evidence gathered by the police, can assist in reconstructing the circumstances of the death.

Who authorises the post-mortem?

Where a person's death must be investigated by the coroner, it is the coroner who authorises a post-mortem (section 21, Coroner's Act).

Prior considerations by the coroner

The consent of the immediate family is not required. However, the law recognises that post-mortems may cause considerable distress for some persons.

In determining whether or not to order a post-mortem, a coroner must:

'have regard to the desirability of minimising the causing of distress or offence to persons who, because of their cultural attitudes or spiritual beliefs, could reasonably be expected to be distressed or offended by the making of that decision' (section 28, Coroners Act).

The Explanatory Memorandum to the Act states that:

'The attitudes required to be considered would include the grief of the immediate family or sensitivities of the cultural community of the deceased'.

(These considerations also apply to the coroner's issue of a warrant to remove the person's body; > see above, *Removal of the person's body*.)

Can I ask the coroner not to order a post-mortem?

If you have any objections to a post-mortem, you may wish to discuss these with the Coroner's Officer, your minister of religion or other persons.

The coroner will consider any request that a post-mortem not be held (> see below). **An autopsy can be delayed while your request is considered – but you must act quickly. If you wish to ask the coroner not to hold an autopsy, you should call the Coroner's Officer immediately.**

Will the coroner order a post-mortem?

The coroner may dispense with a post-mortem *if* he or she is satisfied that the manner and cause of death can be sufficiently determined without one, after considering the information relating to the death, or if an immediate family member (or their representative) asks the coroner not to order a post-mortem (section 20, Coroners Act).

In some cases, an external examination (and blood samples, perhaps) may be sufficient to determine the cause of death. **Where the death is due to a road accident, however, a full autopsy is usually considered necessary.**

Can I (or my representative) ask to attend?

Yes, if you wish. You can also ask to have a further post-mortem conducted; > see also above, *Consideration of immediate family (box)*.

Finding out the cause of death

Provisional cause of death

You can call the Coroner's Officer (or the investigating police officer) to find out the provisional cause of death. This can often be given immediately after the post-mortem. It is up to you to inquire.

Written post-mortem report

Toxicology tests to detect the presence of alcohol or drugs may take several months to complete. The written post-mortem report will be part of the coroner's brief (to request access, > see *Booklet 4*).

Other points concerning the post-mortem

Use of tissue

The consent of the family (or of the person before death) is required before any tissue ('tissue' may include organs) removed during the post-mortem can be used for purposes not related to determining the cause of death of the person – i.e. for therapeutic, medical or scientific purposes (*Transplantation and Anatomy Act 1978 (ACT)*, as amended).

Deceased's doctor can ask to observe post-mortem

A medical practitioner who attended a person (at the person's death, or immediately before the person died, or during the person's last illness) may ask the coroner for permission to observe the post-mortem (section 25, Coroners Act). If this is

relevant to your circumstances, you should notify the relevant doctor and discuss this with them.

Independent tests

You may request that your medical representative conduct independent analysis of specimens. Alternatively, or in addition, you may wish to ask a pathologist to comment on the post-mortem report.

You may request the coroner's permission for you (or your doctor) to arrange a second post-mortem by a different pathologist.

These measures, however, would not usually need to be considered except in cases involving issues of medical treatment and care. Any additional costs involved would be at your own private expense (or possibly at that of the deceased estate if they relate to securing an asset, e.g. the proceeds of a life insurance policy).

5 RELEASE OF THE PERSON'S BODY FOR BURIAL OR CREMATION

Once the coroner is satisfied that sufficient medical evidence has been gathered and arrangements for burial or cremation are under way, the coroner will sign a '**coroner's certificate**' authorising the release of the person's body for burial or cremation (section 16, Coroners Act).

How long will I have to wait?

It may be several days or more after the person has died before their body can be released. There may be delays, depending on the complexity of the case, availability of personnel and type of medical tests carried out.

How will I find out?

If you are using the services of a funeral director, they will be in contact with the Coroner's Officer about this. Ask your funeral director to notify you (or you can call the Coroner's Officer if you have any concerns).

What happens next?

When you have given written permission to a funeral director to act on your behalf, they will collect the coroner's certificate, sign for the release of the person's body and transport the person's body from the morgue to the funeral parlour. You can then arrange with your funeral director for a viewing.

If you wish to be present when the person's body is released, contact your funeral director.

If you are considering making your own arrangements for the funeral, > see also *Booklet 2*.

3 OTHER PROCEDURES

This chapter describes other police and coronial procedures that take place as soon as practicable after the person's death. The order and timing of your contacts with police may vary, depending on circumstances.

1 GIVING INFORMATION TO THE POLICE

The police, acting on behalf of the coroner, will seek information from you (and others) concerning the circumstances surrounding the accident and the death – particularly if you were in the accident yourself or were one of the last persons to see the deceased before the accident.

This information will be sought at the time of notifying you of the death or of making the formal identification, or perhaps a little later on.

The investigating police officer may take notes of what you say or record it on tape. You may be asked to sign a formal statement.

You may know of other people who could provide important information to the investigating police; if so, you should tell the police.

Medical information about the deceased

Before carrying out a post-mortem examination (if authorised by the coroner), the pathologist may require information on the medical history of the person who died; the police may ask you for information. If the person died after treatment in hospital, police will obtain medical records from the hospital.

Tests for alcohol or drugs

It is not compulsory for police to test drivers for alcohol or drugs in all circumstances. The police assess the demeanour of persons involved in the accident. They may use a screening device at the roadside to breath test for *alcohol*. If this detects the presence of alcohol at or over the legal limit, police may take a person into custody and to a police station for a further breath test.

If police suspect a person may be under the influence of a *drug other than alcohol*, they may take the person into custody and then to a hospital for medical examination and blood and urine tests for analysis to check for the presence of drugs.

If a person is *injured* in an accident and *attends a hospital* for examination or treatment, it is compulsory for hospital staff to take blood samples to detect alcohol or drugs. This must be done within two hours of arriving in hospital for drivers, motorcyclists, pedestrians and pedal cyclists aged 15 and over. Relevant laws are the *Motor Traffic (Alcohol and Drugs) Act 1977 (ACT)* and the *Traffic Act 1937 (ACT)*.

Toxicology reports concerning the presence of alcohol or drugs would be included in the coroner's brief (to request access, > see *Booklet 4*).

Possible charges

In cases where serious offences may be involved (e.g. manslaughter, culpable driving), police must inform suspects of their legal rights before interviewing them. This includes the right to have a solicitor present and not to answer questions. However, you are required to give your name and address and produce your driver's licence.

In the case of summary offences (e.g. negligent driving, drink driving), there is no specific requirement for cautioning.

Interviews may be taped; you may request a copy of the taped interview or of your statement (if it has been transcribed).

If this situation applies to you, you should consider consulting a solicitor.

2 RELEASE OF INFORMATION TO THE MEDIA

Various media representatives contact the police for information relating to fatal traffic accidents; some may attend the scene of the accident and take photos or film footage, which may be published or screened on television.

The police will generally tell the media the time, date and place of the accident; however, the police will not release the name of the deceased without the consent of a close family member. You can tell the police:

- not to release the person's name at all; or
- to wait 24 or 48 hours until other close family members have been notified before releasing the person's name.

The media have other avenues of inquiry besides the police; the fact that the person's name is not released by the police does not prevent the media from finding out the name by other means (e.g. death notice in newspaper).

Media industry groups have codes of ethics and provisions for complaints (> see *The Law Handbook: Your Practical Guide to the Law in New South Wales*, details of which are in *Booklet 6*).

3 PERSONAL ITEMS, DOCUMENTS & CLOTHING

Personal items, documents, clothing, etc. may be inspected and documented by police. If an item needs to be retained as evidence relating to the circumstances or cause of death, it should be returned to you later (section 67, Coroners Act).

Personal items

- It is the investigating police officer's responsibility to return relevant personal belongings to the family. This includes items located in the motor vehicle. If these items were not returned to you immediately, police will record the items at the morgue and arrange for their return. In either case, you will be asked to sign a receipt for the items.

- If the death occurred in hospital, it is the hospital's responsibility to return such personal items to the family (unless certain items have been retained by the police as evidence).
- You should check that any wallet, purse, credit card, cheque book, etc. that was on the deceased's person or in the vehicle has been accounted for, either by having been returned by the police (or hospital) or located at home or at the deceased's place of work. **In any case, you should notify the bank to put a stop on accounts (including credit cards) in the deceased's name.**

Documents

If for any reason a document is retained by police, you may ask the coroner for a certified copy of it until such time as the original is returned to you (section 67, Coroners Act).

Clothing

Cutting of clothing

Clothing may be cut by ambulance officers or medical staff. Clothing will usually be cut before a post-mortem – unless you had requested that this not be done.

Destruction or return of clothing

- The deceased's clothing should not be disposed of without permission from the deceased's relatives, preferably next of kin. (However, if a relative cannot be easily contacted and items are contaminated, the coroner may allow the items to be destroyed.)

Generally speaking, police consider such clothing to be contaminated (e.g. by blood); the police will usually ask you to sign a form authorising the destruction of the person's clothing (it will be incinerated at a very high temperature).

However, you can ask for clothing to be returned to you. This is usually possible unless the person who died fell into a high-risk category (e.g. hepatitis C, HIV-AIDS, etc.). If clothes are returned to you, you will be asked to sign a receipt.

- If the hospital removed the person's clothing, it is the hospital's responsibility to return it to you (unless it has been retained by the police as evidence). Hospital staff would alert you if clothing has been cut or is stained. It is up to you to decide whether you want to keep the clothing or have the staff dispose of it (in the latter case, there is no written authorisation involved).

4 DEALING WITH THE MOTOR VEHICLE

Police custody & examination of vehicle

Any motor vehicle involved in the accident will be towed to the police's Accident Investigation compound. The vehicle(s) will be kept in police custody while the police carry out a mechanical examination. This is usually done within a week. The vehicle(s) will then be ready to be removed from police custody. In certain cases, vehicles may be retained as evidence.

NOTE on terms used below: 'your vehicle' refers to the vehicle owned or driven by the family member who died (where applicable), and 'your insurer' refers to the insurer of that vehicle.

Release of vehicle from police custody

The police will ask you to sign a 'permission for release of vehicle' form. You can opt to have your vehicle:

- towed by a tow company contracted by the police to that company's storage yard
- towed to your home
- towed to a garage or smash repairer of your choice for inspection or repair
Your insurer may assess or inspect the vehicle, or you may arrange for an independent mechanical examination (> see below, *Independent tests*).
- towed to a wrecker (for salvage).

Police will have the person who takes the vehicle away sign a receipt when the vehicle is released from police custody.

Who pays for towing?

- Towing from the scene of the accident to the police compound is paid for by the police.
- Towing from the police compound is at your expense; your insurer may cover the cost, depending on your policy and any exclusions (> see also *Motor vehicle insurance* in *Booklet 3*).

If you have any questions

Towing of vehicle

You may have been asked by the police to sign the release form at an earlier stage when you were not in a position to make any informed decisions about your vehicle.

It may be wise to contact your insurer before nominating a specific towing company or smash repairer. The insurer may in some cases then contact the police to make arrangements for towing.

If you have any questions or concerns, call the investigating police officer:

- to find out whether your vehicle has been released; if so, when and where

- to nominate a specific tow or smash repairer that you had not previously indicated on the release form
- to ask about the results of the mechanical examination of your vehicle.

Mechanical examination of vehicle

If you ask, the police will tell you if a problem has been detected. However, they may not provide you with much detailed information at this stage. > See also below, *Independent tests*.

Independent tests

If your vehicle has been written off, it may be wise to delay any decision to dispose of it to a wrecker until you have had the opportunity to get more information about the circumstances of the accident and the death. This would allow you to have an independent examination of your vehicle carried out, if desired.

The coroner's brief will include the report on the mechanical examination of the vehicle(s) (along with other evidence such as statements of witnesses; statements of police concerning the scene of the accident and the position of, and injuries to, the person's body; and the post-mortem report on the medical cause of death).

You (and/or your solicitor) will be able to request access to the brief before the hearing (> see *Booklet 4*).

If any questions arose in your mind at this later stage about the mechanical condition of your vehicle, you could have it re-examined – but obviously only if it has not already been crushed or dismantled by a wrecker.

To get information and advice, contact a solicitor or your insurer. Some insurers have a mechanical expertise section that can give you information and referral to independent experts (such as Unisearch, part of the University of New South Wales, or the Traffic Accident Research Unit at Monash University in Clayton, Victoria) for a detailed examination of your vehicle.

Such an examination would probably be at your own private expense (or that of the deceased estate – if the cost relates to securing an asset such as the proceeds of a life insurance policy or the insured value of the motor vehicle or compensation or damages in case of another's liability). You may also have to pay for storage or additional towing.

4 OTHER IMPORTANT POINTS

- **Ambulance charges:** There is no charge to ACT residents who are injured in a motor vehicle accident and transported by an ACT ambulance. Charges may apply in other circumstances (and may be claimable against compulsory third party insurance, workers' compensation or private health insurance, depending on circumstances).
- **Coroners Act:** > See *Booklet 6* for leads to published information, including how to access the Coroners Act.
- **Documenting your experiences:** It can be very useful later on if you begin now to make notes of what you have experienced, organisations (and names and contact numbers of persons) you have dealt with, expenses you have incurred. Write down the date and time concerned.

This can be especially useful if there is any likelihood of claiming compensation (> see *Booklet 3*), or if you were injured or a witness.
- **Getting assistance:** > See *Booklet 8* for possible sources of assistance.
- **Interpreters:** If necessary, the police will arrange for an interpreter.
- **More about the investigation into the death:** > See *Booklet 4* for information about police and coronial procedures that will take place over the next months and more general background about the coronial system.
- **Organ donation:** The hospital must seek the coroner's permission before organs are removed.
- **Other important information you may need now:** > See *Booklets 2* and *3*.
- **Planning the funeral:** > See *Booklet 2*.
- **Possible criminal charges:** > See also *Booklet 4*.
- **Registering the death and applying for a death certificate:** > See *Booklet 2*.
- **Requesting information about the circumstances of the death:** > See *Booklet 4* – in particular, see *The coroner's brief* and *Other information not usually in the coroner's brief* for information that you may wish to request very soon after the death.
- **Spending time with the body of the person who died:** > See *Booklet 2*.
- **Written post-mortem report:** > See *Booklet 4*.
- **Your reactions:** > See other materials enclosed in this kit, including the chart 'Some commonly reported experiences of grief following a sudden, unexpected death'.

GLOSSARY

autopsy: the examination of the body after death to find out the medical cause of death. Usually this involves looking at the organs as well as the surface of the body. Samples of tissue are usually taken for testing and sometimes organs are removed for further examination. The autopsy is also called a **post-mortem examination**.

coroner: the person who inquires into deaths that are sudden, unexpected or where the cause is unknown (> see also *Booklet 4*).

coroner's brief or file: Information collected by the police will be contained in a file (e.g. **statements** from **witnesses** including experts, medical reports and any other information gathered). After the police have finished their investigation they pass on their file to the **coroner**. The 'coroner's brief', or 'inquest brief', refers to those elements of the file that are to be presented at the **hearing**.

Coroner's Court: A single **coroner** constitutes the court in relation to the death the subject of the **inquest**.

Coroner's Officer: the police officer who reports to and assists the **coroner** in all cases where a death is reported to the coroner. Plays an important role as the link between the coroner, the police and the community.

deceased: dead; the dead person(s).

evidence: all the information that the **coroner** considers when inquiring into the cause and circumstances of the death. Evidence will include the **statements** and information gathered by the police, the medical reports presented and any other information that is presented at the **hearing**.

forensic medicine: application of medical science to the law.

forensic medical centre > see **morgue**.

hearing: A coronial hearing is a public hearing before a **coroner** to decide the circumstances of a death. The coroner hears the **evidence** about the death and then makes findings about the cause and circumstances of the death and related matters.

inquest: (a) the *investigation* held by the **coroner** into the cause and circumstances of the death; (b) the **hearing** held by the coroner. (This booklet uses 'inquest' in its broad sense to designate the coroner's investigation, which begins soon after the person's death. It uses 'hearing' (not 'inquest') to designate the formal coronial hearing. This is in order to reflect the terminology used in the *Coroners Act 1997*.)

morgue: the place where the deceased's body is taken and kept until the **coroner** gives permission for burial or cremation, and where an **autopsy** authorised by the coroner may be carried out.

pathologist: a specialist doctor who carries out the medical examination to find out the medical cause of death.

post-mortem examination > see **autopsy**.

statement: declaration setting out facts, particulars, spoken or in writing.

toxicology: the science of poisons, their detection, etc. Tests may be required to detect the presence of poisons (e.g. alcohol, drugs). The results of these tests are contained in the **toxicology report**.

transcribe: put spoken words, recorded on audio tape, into writing.

witnesses: people who give **evidence**.