

Organ Retention in Ontario After Coroner-Ordered Autopsies

June 5, 2013

The information below only applies to coroner-ordered (i.e. forensic) autopsies performed under the Coroners Act. It does not apply to regular hospital (i.e. medical) autopsies.

Why organs are sometimes retained after autopsy

When deaths are investigated, pathologists sometimes retain organs for more detailed examination to help determine the cause of death or, in some cases, to help determine whether any other family members are at risk. If a genetic cause is found, living family members may be advised to seek testing and, in some cases, treatment, in order to prevent future premature deaths.

Family notification for organs retained after June 14, 2010

Since June 14, 2010, Regulation 180 of the Coroners Act has ensured that, whenever possible, families are routinely notified when an organ is retained and that their wishes are sought regarding how the organ should be treated after testing is complete. While organs were commonly retained after autopsy in past decades, it is rarely necessary to retain an organ today due to advances in medical technology and practice.

Family notification for organs retained before June 14, 2010

In the past, information shared with bereaved families was sometimes limited to spare them further grief. As a result, there are some families that were not notified that an organ was retained prior to June 14, 2010.

Approximately 4,000 of these organs have been kept at hospitals and forensic pathology units throughout the province. There is insufficient information on file to determine whether families were notified at the time of retention. Unfortunately, some of the organs that were initially retained are no longer available, due to the practices of the time.

Ontario's public notification campaign regarding organ retention

The Ontario Forensic Pathology Service and the Office of the Chief Coroner issued a [news release](#) and held a news conference on this topic on June 13, 2012. At the time, Regulation 180 of the Coroners Act required disposition of historically retained organs starting on June 14, 2013.

Since then, a public notice has run twice in newspapers across the province and nationally. The notice invited people to contact the Ontario Forensic Pathology Service and the Office of the Chief Coroner to find out if an organ was retained in their case, and to provide disposition instructions, at the expense of the Ontario Forensic Pathology Service and the Office of the Chief Coroner.

Regulation 180 was recently amended to give families more time to learn about this issue before disposition takes place. A new notice will run in newspapers across the province to inform the public that historically retained organs will now be kept for at least an additional five years.
