Division of Acute Care Surgery Clinical Practice Policies, Guidelines, and Algorithms:
Process for obtaining Medical Autopsy for Trauma Patients Clinical Practice Policy

Original Date: 04/2018  Purpose: To define process for obtaining a Medical Autopsy on trauma patients that has been released by the Harris County ME office.

Definitions:
Cause of death: Term used by the Harris County ME office to determine if a death was accidental or intentional.

Mechanism of Death: Clinical reason for death.

Medical Autopsy: Autopsy performed to identify the mechanism of death.

Background: Texas Code of Criminal procedure 49.25 and Family Coded Chapter 264 requires medical examiners to investigate all unnatural deaths, including murders, suicides and other situations where the cause of death is not known. The Harris County Medical Examiner’s office may release the body if it is determined by the medical examiner on call that the cause of death is clear. The state statute does not allow for medical autopsies to determine the mechanism of death. The American College of surgeons requires that trauma centers have a strong performance improvement patient safety process (PIPS) in place. The PIPS process for deaths includes classification of deaths as; mortality without opportunity for improvement, anticipated mortality with opportunity for improvement, unanticipated mortality with opportunity for improvement. For the performance improvement process on some cases, a medical autopsy is essential to evaluate the performance of the care provided.

If the Harris County ME office has determined that an internal exam is not required to determine the cause of death and the attending surgeon has identified a need for a medical autopsy, an autopsy may be performed in Memorial Hermann Hospital with the UT Department of Pathology. Trauma team members are invited to participate in the autopsy.

Deaths that require an internal autopsy by the Harris County Medical Examiner’s office:
1. All GSW deaths
2. All patients that die in the ED or within 24 hours of arrival
3. All suspected homicide or suicide cases

Obtaining the Medial Autopsy report:
Preliminary reports will be available within 24 hours; final reports will be completed 30-60 days of the medical autopsy. The reports will be part of the EMR and a copy will be sent to the requesting attending. Family members may obtain the autopsy report through medical records.
Obtaining Medical Autopsy for Trauma Patients Released by the Medical Examiner’s (ME) Office

Trauma Attending Surgeon determines a need for a medical autopsy to determine the mechanism of death

Trauma Attending Surgeon contacts the Harris County Medical Examiner On Call to discuss the case. (832-927-5001)

Will Harris County ME office release body to MH/UT for Medical Autopsy?

- Yes: ME Office releases body to the hospital
  - Trauma Attending Surgeon discusses request for autopsy with the family
    - Does family consent to autopsy?
      - Yes: Trauma Attending Surgeon or designee notifies nursing staff and completes Postmortem Examination or Autopsy Consent form (A) and Section 1 of Release of Body/Organ/Tissue Donor form (B)
      - No: Body released to funeral home
  - No: Body will be processed to go to ME Office

OA and nursing staff follows current policy and procedure

The Trauma Attending Surgeon contacts the UT Pathology Autopsy Attending to request the medical autopsy. Contact information is in Amion (UT Pathology – MHH Autopsy). Please call at 8 am the following morning if the death occurs after 5 pm.

UT will proceed to the MH morgue and transfer the patient to UT morgue where the autopsy will be performed.

Within 24 hours, the UT Pathologist will call preliminary results to the requesting Surgeon and send electronic report via e-mail.

Final autopsy report will be available within 30-60 days.

Trauma Surgeon Attending Scripting

"I am calling to request a Medical Autopsy on ___ for (reason). Please e-mail me the preliminary report when it is available."