

2 *The Limits of Pathological Investigation.*

Causes of Death.

- 2.1 The question, “ . (which) . . types of causes of death does the post mortem reveal little or nothing .” , is potentially misleading in that it is very rare that the post mortem does not give some information. Even negative information, i.e. the absence of pathology can be informative if only because it will exclude some potential diagnoses.
- 2.2 Nevertheless, in the context of this inquiry, there are probably three main categories of problems where the post mortem may be limited in providing full explanations even though a cause of death can be identified and provided. These categories are to some extent overlapping and are by no means mutually exclusive.
- 2.3 First, post mortem investigation may have limitations in fully explaining all the events leading to death if a critical event occurs some time, perhaps many days, before death. A clinical event may be recognised, for instance because there is a sudden change in the child's condition, but the specific underlying cause may not be clear. The pathology behind such an event may be obscured by the time of post mortem if there has been a subsequent complex illness and secondary pathology. Although a cause of death might be apparent and, the initial condition known (in the context of this inquiry, congenital heart disease), it is the full sequence of events that may not be clarified by the post mortem.
- 2.4 Secondly, while the post mortem can identify anatomic pathology, there may be circumstances in which there is functional impairment of an organ but no specific structural abnormality can be found to explain that impairment; this lack of correlation between a functional impairment and specific pathology is not uncommon in congenitally abnormal hearts subject to surgery.
- 2.5 Pathological assessment of certain aspects of management are very limited, especially in areas such as drug therapy, including anaesthetics, and in the wider areas of clinical decision making.