

(ii) The pathologist will have no or only limited background knowledge of the survivors and it may be difficult to place rare pathology in context.

Pathologists, in isolation, can make no assessment of overall mortality or morbidity.

(iii) The role of the pathologist at autopsy is to document pathology that is present and assess its significance in relation to death and contribute this information to audit. Individual autopsies do not allow a pathologist to go into the realm of value judgement on, say, a complication of surgery. For instance, it is appropriate for the pathologist to describe the failure of a surgeon's suture line or that it has become infected and that this has contributed to death, but not to conclude that this failure is the result of, say, incompetence or negligence. That a proportion of suture lines fail or become infected may be common to all surgeons or particular surgical procedures. What that proportion might be, is the function of cumulative, comparative audit data.

(iv) Lastly, pathologists, even when conducting autopsies at the request of the Coroner would not consider their role as one of 'hospital policeman'. They have a responsibility to record factors that contribute to death, including, if appropriate, clinical errors (paras 1.2 and 1.3), but would not regard the aim of an autopsy as an exercise in trying to 'catch out' their clinical colleagues.

6 “Postmortem audit in a paediatric cardiology unit.” Russell GA, Berry PJ.

6.1 This article published in 1989, reviewed the pre and post mortem diagnoses of 76 hearts. Autopsy identified 29 (38%), cases in which additional cardiac lesions were found of which 18 were described as minor or did not affect outcome; 51 cases (67%) had undiagnosed complications of the congenital heart disease or its treatment, most commonly myocardial necrosis; 11 cases (14%) showed incidental, extracardiac pathology, 1 of which was contributory to death; 15 cases (21%) showed no additional information at autopsy. In some 80% of cases, autopsy provided new information.