

Our Ref: UBT001-JEA98005 - Ms J Austin
 Your Ref:
 17 November 1999

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Mr Peter Whitehurst
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Dear Mr Whitehurst

Paediatric Cardiac Surgery Inquiry

This letter is in response to yours of 19 October, concerning Issue J. Ian Barrington's supplementary witness statement deals with those matters within his knowledge and is sent under separate cover. This letter addresses the remainder of the matters set out in your letter.

Microscope slides are retained in almost all every case.

Professor Berry's statement to the Inquiry, of 2 July 1999 explains the post-mortem process. At paragraphs 26 to 36 he clearly identifies that histology slides are taken in 88 per cent of cases and retained; that other tissues were usually released for disposal when the histological (microscopy) report was complete; that post-mortem tissue was disposed of in the same way as surgical specimens and in accordance with legal requirements.

The taking of tissue for histology is a normal part of a paediatric post-mortem examination (Guidelines for Post-mortem Reports, The Royal College of Pathologists, August 1993, pages 8 and 9).

These microscope slides are prepared from tissue that has been fixed in formalin, trimmed into slices a few millimetres thick, and embedded in wax to make a "block". Slices of tissue less than 5 thousandths of a millimetre are cut from these blocks and placed on glass to make slides. The tissue is so thin that it must be stained with dyes before it can be seen down the microscope. Many slides can be made from a single block and stained in different ways.

The Report of the Joint Working Party of the Royal College of Pathologists, Royal College of Physicians, and Royal College of Surgeons (August 1991) entitled "The autopsy and audit" states that "diagnostic or confirmatory paraffin section histopathology should be done in every case".

The paraffin blocks and microscope slides are retained in a slide store in the basement of St Michael's Hospital. This is separate from the paper records, but a unique post-mortem number identifies each slide and block. These are filed in numerical order so that they are easily accessible. The store is kept locked at all times. The store contains an estimated 420,000 slides and 372,000 blocks.

The Report of the Working Party of the Royal College of Pathologists and the Institute of Biomedical Science (2nd Edition, 1999) on "The retention and storage of pathological records and archives" recommends that histology slides are retained for 10 years and permanently if practicable (p.17).

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