

Introduction

- 1.1 Despite modern advances in the investigation and management of patients, post-mortem examinations continue to serve the public by providing information leading to further medical advances. New diseases are still being recognised and characterised in tissues obtained during post-mortem examinations — for example, new variant Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease. New imaging techniques have not superseded the traditional post-mortem examination, but are evaluated against post-mortem examination as the ‘gold standard’. Post-mortem examinations also enable:
- information and explanations to be provided to bereaved families and their doctors
 - audit of new and established medical, surgical and investigative procedures and their complications
 - audit of disease treatment, particularly the effects of new or trial therapies and the discovery of unexpected complications
 - collection of accurate mortality and morbidity statistics
 - harvesting of skin, bone, corneas and heart valves (subject to the provisions of the Human Tissue Act, 1961) for the treatment of living patients
 - the legal investigation of accidental, unnatural, suspicious and clinically unexplained deaths
 - teaching and training of medical students, doctors and other health-care personnel.
- 1.2 The Royal College of Pathologists promotes and maintains high standards of post-mortem examination practice. In most cases, this requires the retention of tissues or organs for further examination. To ensure that the retention and use of human tissue is acceptable, the feelings and rights of relatives of those undergoing post-mortem examination must be safeguarded. The opportunity for pathologists to perform post-mortem examination is qualified by legal and ethical constraints. Unfortunately, the interpretation of the law surrounding post-mortem examination is not entirely settled, and is subject to occasional reinterpretation. Also, in a multifaith society, the public's attitudes to the human body after death, and to individual rights and its understanding of informed consent, are constantly changing.
- 1.3 The post-mortem examination is not just the external and internal examination of the body, but includes histological or other laboratory examination of retained tissues. Thus, in many cases, the post-mortem examination would be curtailed and important