



When a child dies in hospital

A guide for bereaved parents,
families and carers

When a child dies in hospital

We would like to help you and your family as much as possible at this time and offer you our deepest sympathy. We hope you find the following information helpful.

If your child's death was sudden, unexpected or unexplained

In certain circumstances the death will have to be reported to the Procurator Fiscal and initially there may be some restrictions on what you are able to do. The Procurator Fiscal will complete their initial enquiries as quickly and sensitively as possible. The process is explained in more detail in the leaflet, *When your child has died suddenly and unexpectedly – what happens next?*, which staff will give you.

Immediately after your child dies

You are welcome to stay with your child for as much or as little time as feels right for you. If you would like family members to be with you, staff will help to make this possible. Staff will be on hand to support you.

Some parents find it helpful to have a brief ceremony of blessing for their child, even if they are not particularly religious. Please ask the nurse if you would like the chaplain to be called, or for a representative of your own faith or belief community to be contacted.

You will be able to hold your child and spend as long as you wish together. Many parents take photographs at this time or, if you wish, a member of the hospital photography team can do this for you. If you would like to help wash and dress your child, staff can help support this. Special items such as a favourite toy or teddy can stay with your child.

Keepsakes and memory boxes

Many families find it comforting to have mementos of their child such as photographs, a lock of hair or hand and foot prints. We will offer you support to create these precious keepsakes and give you a special memory box to keep them in. If you prefer, these mementos can be kept safely for you in the hospital in case you want them at a later time. If you

have any questions or there is anything else you would like to do, staff will do their best to accommodate your wishes.

Organ and tissue donation

If you have decided to donate your child's organs to help others, the Specialist Nurse for Organ Donation will provide information and support. Even when organ donation is not possible, you may be able to donate tissue (such as corneas and heart valves) for transplant, but this must be done within 48 hours of the death. Please speak to staff as soon as possible if you wish to consider this further and they will contact the organ donation nurse and arrange for them to come and speak with you.

When you leave the hospital

We will continue to care for your child until you make arrangements for a funeral director to move him or her to their premises, or to another place of your choice. In the meantime, you can come back to visit your child in the hospital's bereavement suite - please contact ward staff to arrange this. You will also have the opportunity to see your child at the funeral director's premises and it might be possible for your child to be moved to a children's hospice or brought home before the funeral. The ward staff or your funeral director will be able to discuss these options with you.

Taking your child home

Some families wish to consider the option of taking their child home themselves. If you would like to discuss this, please speak to a member of staff.

The medical certificate of cause of death

In most cases, the doctor will give you the medical certificate of cause of death (often just called the 'death certificate') soon after the death or the next day. Sometimes it may take longer, for example if the doctor needs to find out more about why your child died or report his or her death to the Procurator Fiscal. You will need the medical certificate to register your child's death. You should read the medical certificate and ask the doctor to explain anything you don't understand. If possible it is best to do this before you go to the registration office. The registration process is explained in more detail in the leaflet, *Registering your child's death*.

Hospital post-mortem examination

If the death was sudden, unexpected or unexplained, the Procurator Fiscal may order a post-mortem examination as part of their investigations. In other circumstances, a senior doctor may ask your permission to carry out a hospital post-mortem examination to gain more information about your child's death, to better understand their illness or to increase medical knowledge for the benefit of future pregnancies or other children with a similar condition. If this is the case, the doctor will discuss it with you and explain what is involved.

You do not have to agree to a hospital post-mortem, but if you do agree the doctor will ask you to sign an authorisation form. Please speak to staff if you have any questions or concerns about the decision. If you do authorise a hospital post-mortem, it should not delay the funeral arrangements. Further information leaflets about hospital post-mortem examinations are also available - please ask staff for a copy if you would like one.

Follow-up meeting

Many parents find they have unanswered questions about their child's illness or death and it's important to have a chance to ask these. It can be helpful to come back to the hospital some time later to speak to the staff who cared for your child. In a few weeks' time your child's doctor will contact you to offer you a follow-up meeting, should you wish it. This provides an opportunity to discuss the results from any examinations carried out and is an opportunity to go over exactly what happened and ask any questions.

Remembering your child

A Memorial Book is kept in the Sanctuary at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Edinburgh in which your child's name can be inscribed. The hospital chaplain will write to you inviting you to make an entry in the Memorial Book in memory of your child.

There is also an annual Memorial Service to remember children who have died. This is held in Edinburgh in November every year. Parents whose child has died are personally invited to the first service after the death. After that, there is an open invitation to return in future years.