

# When a loved one dies

## Emergency Department factsheets

**This factsheet explains what happens in the Emergency Department when someone dies and what family need to do next.**

When someone dies in the Emergency Department, it is usually sudden and unexpected. As a family member or friend, you are likely to feel shock, confusion and disbelief.

At this time you may find it hard to take in or make sense of things you have been told at the hospital. You may also have questions about what happens next, and where to get help if you need it.

Hospital staff are there to guide you and help if there is anything you don't understand. The Emergency Department may have a Social Worker you can talk to about what has occurred and help prepare you for what to do next. A Pastoral Care worker may also be available for support.

### How do I find out what happened to my loved one?

Usually the doctor who treated your loved one in the Emergency Department will meet with you. The doctor will explain your loved one's condition on arrival at the hospital, treatment provided, and if they know the cause of your loved one's death.

Sometimes, the doctor may not know the cause of death. In these situations the hospital is legally required to report their death to the coroner. The coroner may then order a coronial investigation to determine the cause. In some circumstances the coroner may request an autopsy. The doctor will advise you if this is necessary.

For more information about coronial issues please also see the 'Coronial investigations explained' factsheet.

### Can I see my loved one?

Family members who gather at the hospital are usually asked if they would like to see their loved one after they have died.

When a loved one has died unexpectedly, it can be difficult for family and friends to grasp the reality of what has just happened. Although it can be painfully sad, being able to see, touch and talk to a loved one after they have died can be important for those who are grieving. This is always a very personal decision.

In some cases it may be possible to arrange a subsequent viewing in the hospital mortuary. You will need to ask whether this can be arranged. Viewings can also be arranged at the funeral home.

### What will happen next?

After you leave the hospital, your loved one's body will be transferred to the hospital mortuary.

If a coronial investigation is necessary, your loved one will be transferred to the nearest government mortuary. In Brisbane this is Queensland Health Forensic and Scientific Services in Coopers Plains. In regional areas, this is usually located at the local hospital.

After the hospital or the Coroner release your loved one's body, your chosen funeral director will transfer the body to the funeral home.

For more information about funeral arrangements please also see the 'When someone dies - practical issues' factsheet.

### What happens to my loved one's personal belongings?

Any personal items are usually returned to the next-of-kin whilst in the Emergency Department. If anything is left behind at the hospital you should ask the hospital staff how you can collect it.

In some situations where the Coroner is investigating the cause of death, permission may be required from Police before removing jewellery, clothing or other items.

## What should I do when I get home?

### Contact others

There are many people who need to be told that someone has died. The most important people to contact initially are those family members and friends who were closest to your relative as well as those who can provide you with support.

Some other people that may also need to be notified early on could include workplaces, schools, community services, Executor of the Will (if there is one), Centrelink or Department of Veterans Affairs. Most other organisations can be notified after the funeral or as necessary.

For more information about who you may need to notify please also see the 'When someone dies - practical issues' factsheet.

### Arrange support

Over the coming days there may be a lot of activity around your home. Family and friends may drop by or arrive from out of town. There may be tasks you need to handle, phone calls to answer and you may still need to look after a family and run a household.

All of this can be particularly stressful at a time when you are emotionally pressured and may not be thinking as clearly as you usually would. It can be helpful to have someone who is supportive close by to help with practical tasks if you feel overwhelmed.

### Plan the funeral

You can begin to arrange a funeral whenever you are ready, even if there is a coronial investigation. To do this you will need to select a funeral director, who will guide you through the process and assist with all arrangements.

As you start planning the funeral, you will naturally reminisce about your loved one's life. You may think of things you wish you could have said to them if you had the time again. It may help to write your thoughts and feelings in a letter, poem or journal. This can be helpful for

children too. A letter or drawing could be left with your loved one's body before the funeral.

For more information about arranging a funeral please also see the 'When someone dies - practical issues' factsheet.

## How can I care for myself and my family?

When faced with a loss, we experience one of the strongest emotions – that of grief. Knowing a few things about grief may help you and those around you at this time.

- Grief is a normal and natural response when someone close to you has died.
- Everyone grieves in their own way, including children. It is important to recognise and respect this and not compare yourself to others.
- Grief can have a range of impacts on a person's physical body, thoughts and emotions.
- You may feel a range of strong emotions such as sadness, anger, guilt, disbelief, confusion, fear or numbness. These emotions can come in waves and with differing levels of intensity over time.
- Expressing what you are thinking or feeling to a trusted person can be helpful.
- Physical effects of grief can include: changes in sleep patterns, appetite and energy levels. It will help to eat healthy foods. Try to get some exercise and rest when you can. You should see your general practitioner if you are worried about your health.
- Grief can affect your ability to concentrate or make decisions in the way you usually would. Where possible, try not to make any major decisions too soon after the loss of someone you love - such as moving house or sorting your loved one's belongings. This will give you time to think things through.
- Be patient and allow yourself to grieve for as long as you need. Grief has no timeline. Often days with special memories, such as anniversaries, birthdays or Christmas, may bring a fresh wave of grief. It can be helpful to prepare for these occasions so that you feel more in control.
- Most people are able to live with their loss without professional intervention. If you are finding it difficult to get from day to day there are services in your local community that can provide support and understanding. You can also speak to a general practitioner.

- For more information about counselling services and support groups please also see the 'Bereavement support services' factsheet.

## Our condolences

On behalf of the staff, we extend our deepest sympathy to you and your family on the sudden death of your loved one.

You are very welcome to contact us if you think of any further questions when you get home, or at any time in the future.

Please contact

Name:

Position:

Phone:

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other healthw professional to make sure this information is right for you.