

Patient Death Support

First – patient deaths are not easy. It is normal to feel uncomfortable. You are not alone, please reach out to the chiefs or attending if you need support. Thank you for doing this difficult work.

How to do a Death exam, i.e. pronouncing a patient as deceased:

1. Before you go into the room: Ask your senior/attending/nurse any questions about the scenario – events leading up to the death, family situation, if autopsy is desired or required, if organ donation has been discussed, if social work or chaplain is available. Make sure the attending is aware of the patient's status. Generally, it is helpful to have someone with you when you go into the room, for example, the nurse who has been working with the family. Be sure to leave your pager(s) outside of the room – e.g. with another resident or resource nurse.
2. Assume a quiet, respectful role. Introduce yourself. "I am __, the doctor on call."
3. Determine the relations present in the room. You will need a family member's name for the death certificate. Empathize simply – "I am so sorry for this difficult time," or "This must be very difficult."
4. Let them know what you will do: "I am going to do an exam, including listening to the chest, checking his/her eyes, and checking for response to my touch." Ask if they wish to be present and if they have questions. It is OK for someone to be holding the patient while you do the exam.
5. Exam – to be done gently and quietly
 - a. Confirm the patient's ID with name/MRN on bracelet.
 - b. Listen for heart sounds or breathes for 60 seconds. Check for a central (carotid) pulse at the same time. If you hear any breaths or heart beats, you can let the family know that "___ is still present" and decide when to re-examine.
 - c. Check pupils for position and response to light (in death, they will be fixed and dilated). If it does not feel right for a particular scenario, do not use a bright light for this.
 - d. Check for response to tactile stimulus. (Respectfully of course – no sternal rub. Can squeeze the trapezius, squeeze a hand. There should be no response.)
6. Mark the time of death (This is the time when it is medically confirmed by your exam – ok if patient had died some time prior.)
7. State clearly to the family/caregivers that "___ has died" to avoid ambiguity. Terms like "passed" can be unclear.
8. Moment of silence.
9. Offer condolences. "I am so sorry for your loss." Offer extra support – "Is there anyone you would like me to reach out to right now? Would you like me to call the chaplain?" Let them know to take their time and to let you or the nurses know if they need anything.
10. Ask if they would like an autopsy (if not already known)
11. Exit the room and take a deep breath. Again, this is not easy.

Next steps. Use the “Discharge as Deceased” navigator in Epic as you do these steps.

1. Call the attending provider if they are not already aware.
2. Call admitting 774-443-2244 to notify them of the death. Let them know you will be filling out the death paperwork in Epic. They will create the death certificate and return it for you to sign.
3. Call the New England Organ Bank 1-800-446-6362 to notify them of the death. Mark down the name and phone number of the person to whom you spoke, as well as a case reference number.
4. Call the medical examiner 1-800-962-7877. Record the case number.
5. Call the patient’s primary care doctor.
6. Write a brief death note (template in Epic).
7. Write a discharge summary.