New Requirements for Submission of Cases for Autopsy to Central Texas Autopsy, PLLC in Lockhart, TX

March 19, 2020

In light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic affecting the United States my office has had to develop criteria for submission of cases for autopsy. In the past, my office has been fully capable of accepting virtually any case that you submitted for autopsy (except for highly contagious cases such as rabies). However, with the SARS-CoV-2 virus (the virus that results in COVID-19 illness) very little is currently known about the viability of the virus in the body after death. As the pandemic continues and the presence of the virus spreads it is very likely that a large percentage of dead bodies might be positive for the virus. Despite calls to multiple companies and agencies, I have been unable to obtain the preferred swab and transport medium for submitting nasopharyngeal swabs on deceased individuals for testing for COVID-19. In order to continue providing you autopsy service, and in an effort to protect my staff and myself from postmortem transmission of the virus, the following criteria for submission of cases is being put into effect immediately.

First and foremost - If you wish to submit a case for autopsy it is imperative that you call my office to give us details of the case prior to sending the body. Our phones are answered 24/7/365 so you should be able to speak directly with one of my assistants, or if you need to talk to me, that can be arranged. You will be asked if you are aware of the new criteria for submission of a case. In particular – you will need to tell us if the deceased individual has been tested for SARS-CoV-2 and if so what the result was. You will also be asked about any travel history on the part of the decedent. We will need as full and complete a medical history as possible. With this in mind, the following categories of submission have been established:

- In cases where the deceased individual, regardless of age, was diagnosed with COVID-19, and has died from the infection, those cases will not be accepted at my facility. You, or the physician treating the patient, should be able to sign cause of death as complications of COVID-19 infection even without an autopsy.

- All deceased individuals, regardless of age, who displayed symptoms of COVID-19 infection (see the symptom list below) prior to death but were not confirmed to be positive for the virus – those cases will also not be accepted for autopsy at my office since I have no way to test for the virus at this time.

- If the deceased individual is reportedly positive for the virus (through antemortem testing), but the death is due to another cause such as an MVA, gunshot wound, etc., or due to a probable natural disease other than COVID-19 illness where there are no symptoms of viral infection – those cases can be sent.

- If the deceased individual has not been tested prior to death for the virus, and the death is due to a non-natural cause, such as MVA, gunshot wound, etc., or the cause of death is unknown and
the decedent has not displayed symptoms of COVID-19 – those cases can be sent, but the autopsy might be delayed in order to test the body for the presence of the virus prior to performing the autopsy if we are able to obtain a test kit.

**In regards to autopsies being attended by law enforcement:** At this time in an abundance of caution, I am requesting that no law enforcement individuals attend the autopsy, unless there is an urgent need to do so. Accommodations can be made if that is necessary. All autopsies performed at my office are well documented by numerous digital photos, which can be obtained if needed at a later date.

**In regards to transport of bodies to CTA:** In order to lessen the possibility of spread of the virus from a deceased individual, a plastic bag can be placed over the head of the decedent prior to placing the body in a body bag. **The decedent’s body must be tagged in some manner with the decedent’s name PRIOR to arriving at my office.** Unidentified or untagged bodies will not be accepted at my office.

**Symptoms of COVID-19 infection:** The reported most common symptoms of COVID-19 infection include fever, dry cough, fatigue, and shortness of breath. The incubation period after exposure to the development of symptoms averages 5 days. It is important to remember that some individuals who test positive for the virus may not display symptoms but may still be able to transmit the virus. It is also important to remember that when at the scene of a dead individual, the more likely exposure to the virus would be through the live individuals working the scene. However, the virus can reportedly survive on inanimate objects for a few days, so care should be taken at scenes in order to avoid potential exposure to the virus even though the dead individual is not able to produce droplet spray as in a cough. Protective equipment should be utilized but also hand washing and avoidance of face touching should be practiced.

You are always welcome to call my office if you have a question as to whether or not a body needs an autopsy. In many instances, if you give me details of the case, including medical history, I can usually advise you as to the probable cause of death.

My office has limited space for body storage. Also, currently there is a shortage of some supplies needed for autopsy performance. If the pandemic becomes much larger than expected, at some point I may not be able to accept cases on a regular basis. If my office approaches capacity levels and cannot receive any more bodies you will be informed by email of the situation. For now, with the adoption of the above criteria for submission of cases, I do not expect there to be any problems with our ability to accept cases and perform autopsies. If, however, my staff or I become disabled by the virus, and I am unable to continue with day to day operations, you will be notified by email.

Please feel free to contact me, or my staff, with any questions you may have or clarifications you may need in regards to the new criteria for submission of cases. Above all – stay safe and healthy!

Suzanna Dana, MD  
CEO – Central Texas Autopsy, PLLC  
Lockhart, TX 78644