



## When Someone Dies in Hospital

The management and staff of Eastern Health wish to express our sincere condolences to you at this time. Eastern Health staff will do their best to support you to understand what happens after someone dies in hospital and what you might need to do next to carry out what is appropriate for you or the deceased person, recognising there are many different cultural, spiritual and traditional beliefs and practices associated with death.

This information is provided as a guide to:

- Some questions asked when a death occurs in hospital.
- Emotional responses experienced when a death occurs.
- Support services in the community
- A list of practical issues you may need to attend to.



### **INTERPRETERS - How you can contact us from home:**

If you have any English language difficulties and would like to contact us, you can use a telephone interpreter service - **call 131450**. At first, a person will answer the call in English and you will need to follow these steps:

- 1) Name the language you speak and wait on the phone. You will be connected to an interpreter who speaks your language, then
- 2) Provide the telephone number you want to call
- 3) If you know, provide the name of the person you want to speak to
- 4) Wait on the phone to be connected and the interpreter will assist you. Interpreter services are usually provided free\* of charge to you.

This service is \*free of charge for all the Government funded organisations marked with 

## **Eastern Health contacts:**

Eastern Health: doctors, nurses, social workers, chaplains and pastoral care staff are available to answer your questions, offer information and support during this time. Contact the staff from **Monday to Friday, 9am -5pm**. Ask our reception staff to connect you to the department or staff member you would like to speak to. You may need to leave a message with your contact details, if they are not available.

***During the weekends the level of support staff available is reduced.***

Angliss Hospital	Ph: (03) 9764 6111
Box Hill Hospital	PH: (03) 9895 3333
Healesville Hospital	Ph: (03) 5962 4300
Maroondah Hospital	Ph: (03) 9871 3333
Peter James Centre	Ph: (03) 9881 1888
Wantirna Health	Ph: (03) 9955 1200
Yarra Ranges Health	Ph: (03) 9091 8888
Yarra Valley Community Health Service	Ph: 1300 130 381

 All Hospitals above.

## **What happens next?**

### **Viewing the person who has died in hospital**

Viewing the person who has died is a very individual decision. It is important to remember that hospital staff or funeral directors are available to support you in this process.

For some people seeing the person who has died is an important part of their grieving process. Viewing the person who has died while they are still in hospital can be arranged. Discuss your needs with staff and let them know, if you are waiting for additional family members to arrive. Facilities are limited within the hospital and preference would be for a viewing to occur at the funeral home.

The person who has died will remain at the hospital until you have identified a funeral director and given them permission to transfer the person to the funeral home of your choice.

### **Viewing the person who has died at the funeral home**

Viewing the person who has died can also be arranged through the funeral director. A cost may be associated with this request. A viewing can enable family or friends who were not able to be at the hospital at the time of death, an opportunity to say their final good-byes. A viewing can also be very important if the person who has died is to be transferred interstate or overseas for burial, cremation or interment.

### **Contacting funeral directors**

Eastern Health cannot recommend funeral directors. The person who has died may have made their own funeral arrangements before they died or made their wishes known to family or a close friend or through their will - discuss this decision with your family or friends. Consult your local telephone directory or speak to a hospital staff member for a listing of funeral directors.

### **Pre-paid funeral arrangements**

Before you appoint a funeral director, check if the person who has died has left any paperwork indicating they have pre-paid their funeral arrangements with a particular company, including burial, cremation or interment decisions..

Costs and services vary between funeral directors and we recommend you talk with and compare a few different companies before making any final decision, to ensure your needs will be met and you understand the costs you are agreeing to pay.

Some people are entitled to financial support for funeral arrangements.

### **Decisions and choices**

Your chosen funeral director will meet with you to discuss your choice of burial, interment or cremation of the person who has died. There is also a choice between a funeral, memorial or remembering service, or another type of ritual according to your needs, cultural, religious, spiritual or traditional customs.

In some circumstances, families may want to have the person who has

died buried, cremated or interred, in a country town, interstate or overseas. This should be discussed with the funeral director as soon as possible.

There is no legal requirement for a service or ritual of any kind. The only legal requirement you must comply with, is to make arrangements for the burial, internment or cremation of the deceased person's body through a recognised cemetery or crematorium.

### **Special customs or traditions**

Please inform our staff as soon as possible of any particular needs you have including cultural, religious, spiritual or traditional customs you would like to carry out while they are in Eastern Health's care.

### **Pastoral care**

Pastoral care staff are available at each hospital site and can support you to arrange any specific spiritual needs or rituals you may require, including contacting any special representatives of your religious tradition or spirituality or access to sacred texts.

These pastoral care staff are available to all people whether they profess a particular religion or if they would simply like someone to talk to. Contact pastoral care, if you would like to speak to them.

Each hospital site also provides an area known as Sacred Space available for some quiet reflection or a time of prayer.

### **Transferring care from Eastern Health**

Once you have made a decision to engage the services of a particular funeral director, they will transfer the person who has died to the funeral home of your choice.

If an autopsy is to be carried out on the person who has died, there may be a delay in releasing the person to the funeral director. Another cause for delay can be the involvement of the State Coroner.

### **Death certificate**

A death certificate will be completed by the treating medical team. The hospital staff will then forward this certificate to the funeral director who

will lodge it with the Births, Deaths and Marriages bureau. A certified copy will be posted to the person responsible by Births, Deaths and Marriages bureau. If a copy is required urgently please talk to the funeral director.

### **Organ or tissue donation**

You may be asked by Eastern Health staff to consider organ or tissue donation.

This involves giving your written consent to allow specific organs or tissues to be taken from the person who has died and then given for transplant to a critically ill person to improve and in some cases, save their life. In some cases the person who has died may have left instructions that they want to be an organ or tissue donor, and you will be asked to support their instruction with your consent. Staff will also check if the person who has died has left any documentation expressing a desire **not** to become a donor, which will ensure respect for their wishes.

If there are any religious or cultural objections to this, please notify staff immediately.

Additional information is available from:

Donate life, Australian Organ & Tissue Donation & Transplantation Authority [www.donatelife.org](http://www.donatelife.org) 

### **Post mortem examination (autopsy)**

There are two different types of autopsies:

- Non coronial post mortem examinations: which occur at the hospital
- Coronial post mortem examination: part of State Coroner's review process

### **Non coronial post mortem examination**

Eastern Health medical staff may ask you to give consent to a post mortem examination. It is very important that you let staff know, if you have an objection to this process, or concerns about special cultural customs for the person who has died. This examination can assist staff with understanding why the person died, particularly if

the death is unexpected. Often family members want to know the reason as well. Before you make a decision, staff will discuss what is going to happen and why it is helpful, and we encourage you to ask any questions to clarify what you are unclear about, or if you need more information.

A copy of the post mortem report will be sent to the treating team of the person who has died. Your family doctor is also able to request a copy of this report. Families can access the report through the treating team or your family doctor. This report may take up to 4 weeks to complete and in some cases where more specialised analysis may be required, availability for the final report may take longer.

### **Involvement of the Victorian State Coroner**

The Coroner is involved when there needs to be a review of the person's medical history and the circumstances of their death. Usually this only involves a phone call between the hospital and the Coroner. Occasionally, the person who has died will need to be transferred from the hospital directly to the Coroner's Court in Southbank, Melbourne for a more detailed review.

The Coroner is legally mandated to become involved when:

- A person dies unexpectedly or is involved in an accident, injury or dies in an unnatural way
- A person was in the custody of police prior to death
- A person died unexpectedly during a medical procedure
- A doctor was unable to sign a death certificate giving the cause of death
- The identity of the person is not known
- A person is in the care of the Department of Human Services
- A person was an involuntary patient scheduled under the Mental Health Act

Where there is a concern that a person's death may need to involve the Coroner, an Eastern Health doctor will consult directly with the Coroner's Office and then with the family. The family of the person who has died can also consult the Coroner's Office for advice, if they have any concerns.

Coroner's Service Centre   
PH (03) 9684 4444  
Country callers: 1800 136 852 (Free call)  
[www.coronerscourt.vic.gov.au](http://www.coronerscourt.vic.gov.au)

The Coroner is required by law to report:

- The name of the person who died
- The reasons the person died
- The details needed to formally register the person's death

### **The Coroner's review process**

When reviewing the circumstances of a person's death, an autopsy or pathology tests may need to be carried out. You must advise Eastern Health staff, if you do not want an autopsy to be carried out on the person who has died. Staff can then advise the Coroner of your wishes so they will be taken into account.

Depending on the circumstances of a person's death, specialist reports from experts, such as police, doctors, fire brigade and statements from any witnesses to the person's death may also need to be gathered. Only a small number of deaths involve an inquest (which is a court hearing), where all the evidence and reports are reviewed.

Most investigations involve people who have died of natural causes. The involvement of the coroner does not mean someone has done something wrong or there is anything for family members to be concerned about.

The Coroner's Court has a list of support services for individuals or families involved in this process. These can be found in the Coroner's Court brochure which can be accessed by Eastern Health staff, police or the Coroner's court.

### **Delay in funeral arrangements**

The release of the person who has died for funeral arrangements may be delayed by more than 24 hours if the Coroner is involved. Once the Coroner has completed their tasks the funeral director can

transfer the person who has died directly from the Coroner's Office on your behalf.

Ask Eastern Health staff to advise the Coroner, if you require funeral arrangements to take place within a certain time.

### **Practical issues**

You may wish to ask another person, perhaps a trusted friend or family member, to help you. Some people find attending to these practical tasks is helpful. It is important to do what you feel is right for you. Do not be afraid to ask others for assistance as many people like to feel useful at this time, but do not know how to help.

### **Wills**

It is important to locate the deceased person's Will, final instructions or any other legal documents. A Will or final instructions may specify the choices the person made in relation to funerals and burial, cremation or internment. Another document of importance may be the existence of a pre-paid funeral agreement or arrangements with a particular cemetery.

For legal advice about Wills and final instructions contact any of the following:

- The Victorian State Trustees   
PH (03) 9667 6444  
[www.statetrustees.com.au](http://www.statetrustees.com.au)
- The Victorian Legal Aid Commission   
PH (03) 9269 0234 or 677 402 (Country Callers)  
[www.legalaid.vic.gov.au](http://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au)
- The private solicitor of the person who has died, or one of your choice – refer to the local telephone directory for a list.

### **Probate**

The Probate Office is part of the Supreme Court, which officially recognises an Executor, the person authorised to finalise an estate. If there is no Will, the Probate Office will appoint an Executor (usually

the next of kin) for the estate. The Probate Office will give you guidelines identifying the tasks that need to be completed. A solicitor or Trustee Company may be nominated to assist with the responsibilities of being an Executor.

The Probate Office   
PH (03) 9603 9296

### **Funeral Assistance**

Bereavement Assistance may be available to anyone who cannot afford a commercial funeral. If you require further assistance with this please speak to the hospital social worker.

PH (03) 9564 7778  
[www.bereavementassistance.org.au](http://www.bereavementassistance.org.au)

### **Financial Support**

Funeral arrangements can be expensive and some people are entitled to financial support through Centrelink.

To check if you are entitled to any financial assistance, contact the Centrelink Office in your area. 

[www.centrelink.gov.au](http://www.centrelink.gov.au)

### **Who to notify – Checklist**

A number of people and organisations may need to be advised when a person dies. You may need to change the details for joint accounts to your name, if your spouse or partner has died.

The list below is offered as a guide:

- Family members, relatives, friends and work colleagues
- The person named as the Executor of the Will
- Solicitor
- Doctor, dentist and any other health practitioners who were involved in the person's life

- Financial Institutions (banks, building societies, Superannuation funds).
- Religious representative or church / mosque etc. to which the person was a member
- Medicare  and health funds
- Insurance companies (life, house, car, etc.)
- Employers - for both the person who has died and your own, if you wish to apply for time off work.
-  Centrelink– If the person was receiving a pension. In addition a spouse or carer may be eligible for a Bereavement Allowance for up to 14 weeks after the death. You will also need to let them know, if you were receiving a carer's payment / allowance  
Centrelink PH 13 23 00  
[www.centrelink.gov.au](http://www.centrelink.gov.au)
-  Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA)  
(if the person who died was receiving a DVA pension)  
PH (03) 9284 6000  
[www.dva.gov.au](http://www.dva.gov.au)
- Landlord, if the person was renting
-  Local government or council support services ( if the person was receiving home care services and /or Meals on Wheels
-  Other hospitals or health care agencies who may have been involved in the care of the person who died e.g. transplant units
-  Australian Taxation Office

-  Electoral Office - Federal and State
-  RACV, Ambulance, Vic Roads  
e.g. to cancel a licence and change or cancel car registration
- Clubs or Associations e.g. sporting or social groups
- Post Office and public services e.g. library
-  Utility provider e.g. to cancel the gas, water, electricity, telephone or change the billing information

## Understanding grief

### **Different expressions and feelings**

Grief is normal after a person dies and can be felt in many different ways. There are many different physical, emotional and psychological responses including shock, sadness, anger, emptiness, fear, despair, loneliness, guilt, numbness, nausea and depression.

Grief may also include relief, especially when the person who died may have been ill for sometime, or the relationship you or family members had with that person may have been difficult. For some people it can feel like your world has stopped. Or you may not feel any different and continue on with your life in the usual ways.

There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief. Individuals within a family, work colleagues and friends can also feel and express grief differently to others around them.

It is important to remember that if your grief does feel overwhelming, there are professional counsellors available to help you in your community, who can support you during this time. Consult your local doctor, counsellor or health practitioner, if you have any concerns about your grief or feel you are experiencing physical symptoms or changes.

## Living with grief

How you experience grief is very individual. Some people prefer:

- Spending time with family and friends while others like to be alone.
- Practicing specific traditions including special meals, rituals, visits to the cemetery or places of special significance. Other people may choose to re-visit special places they shared with the deceased.
- Returning to work or normal activities, while others need more time away or return at a slower pace.
- Talking to a trusted person about their feelings: a friend, family member, colleague, religious / spiritual leader, counsellor. Another person may prefer to spend time writing a journal rather than talking to anyone.
- Crying - this is one way the body releases sadness and grief. If this is your experience, find a place where you feel safe to express your emotions and let them flow. Other people may find it hard to cry.

It is important to remember that what is helpful to you may not be the same for others around you. Even the people close to you may not be able to respond to your feelings. If possible, try to tell the people around you what you need them to do. These can be thought about more carefully once the intensity of grief has passed and you can be sure the decisions you make are right for you. What feels right at one time may be wrong at another.

Be patient with your grief as it takes different amounts of time for each individual. For some people the grief never goes away but does become more bearable over time. As the intensity diminishes, it will become easier to focus on special positive memories and to shape your own life once again.

Try not to feel pressured to make any significant decisions, such as selling your house, giving up work, or disposing of any belongings or mementos of the person who died.

## **Supporting children**

Helping children to grieve and express their feelings varies from one culture, tradition and family to another. Where appropriate to your specific traditions, try to support children to share their thoughts and feelings and participate in any events that remember or honour the person who has died.

## **What does death mean?**

Depending on their age, children express their grief differently to adults. This can include asking lots of questions about the person who has died:

- Where are they?
- What is happening to them?
- When will they come home?
- Where are they going?

If children have not experienced a pet dying or the death of a loved one, they may want to know what being dead means. It is very important to answer children's questions as honestly as possible, and to be age appropriate. If you or others in the family do not feel comfortable answering these questions, ask hospital staff, funeral directors or a counsellor to help you with this.

Answers that are vague, or indicate the person who has died has gone away or gone to sleep only confuses and sometimes distresses children more. Not knowing where someone is can make it harder for children to trust other adults who may be absent will return, as promised. Sometimes children feel frightened that these adults may also leave them. They need reassurance that this will not happen, and that they will continue to be cared for and loved.

Children may also wonder when the person who died is going to return, some thinking they must have done something wrong if there has always been contact and now there is no contact at all.

## **Children expressing grief**

Children often grieve differently to adults expressing emotions through behaviour such as separation anxiety, lack of appetite, day

dreaming, becoming disruptive. Some children may act as though they are unaffected by the death of a loved one. Withdrawal or lack of interest in activities may be another response. Children need to be given opportunities to express their feelings in ways that are safe and where they feel reassurance.

Sometimes children appear to be unaffected by the death of someone they know and may express their feelings inappropriately, including playing or laughing at the funeral or quickly resuming the 'normal' activities. This does not mean they do not care, it may mean they need time out before dealing with their feelings. If children are not upset or concerned, adults should not be worried unless they notice changes in the child's behaviour that is unusual or worries them.

Care-givers of children, such as teachers and pre-school staff, should be told of the death to enable them to support the child appropriately and be aware of any behaviour changes that may need to be addressed.

### **Involving children in a viewing**

Involvement of children in viewing the person who has died should be encouraged, where appropriate to your culture. Sometimes children like to place special items in the coffin. If they cannot do this themselves, items can be given to the funeral directors to arrange for them.

Children who are supported with an opportunity to see the person who died before the coffin is sealed, often understand more realistically that this person is no longer breathing, talking, moving. This understanding may make it easier for them to accept the person is dead and is not alive inside a box or the ground, which can cause significant distress.

### **Involving children in funeral services**

Involving children in any form of service, ritual or time of remembering gives them an opportunity to feel a part of what is happening. Depending on their age, they can be given an opportunity to share a story or draw a picture that shows something

important to them about the deceased person. Even the simple task of giving out a service leaflet or some kind of memento can be enough to involve them.

The most important part of any participation is having an adult present who will answer the questions they ask honestly and age appropriately. This adult needs to explain to them what is happening and why, and what is the meaning of the different things people are doing. This adult may be a trusted family member or friend.

If you want to involve children in any of these aspects of funeral preparations and do not feel able to be the adult support person for them, arrange for another adult who feels comfortable, or discuss this with your funeral director.

### **Support in the Weeks Ahead Support Services**

Listed below are the contact details of some organisations in the community who support individuals after a loved one has died, who are able to listen and help you in your grief:

#### **NALAG (VIC)**

##### **National Association for Loss and Grief**

NALAG can provide the contact details of counsellors in your local area.

PH 1800 100 023 (Free call)

[www.nalagvic.org.au](http://www.nalagvic.org.au)

#### **Grief Line**

24 hours Bereavement Telephone Counselling Service (12noon-3pm)

PH (03) 9935 7400

[www.griefline.org.au](http://www.griefline.org.au)

#### **Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement**

Bereavement Counselling Service

PH (03) 9265 2100

or 1800 642 066 (Free call)

[www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)

## **Road Trauma Support Team**

Bereaved Support Group  
PH - 1300 367 797 (Free call)

## **Eastern Region Community Health Centres**

Provide low cost counselling:

Inner East Community Health Centre 

PH (03) 9818 6703

[www.iechs.org.au](http://www.iechs.org.au)

Eastern Access Community Health, (EACH) 

PH (03) 9879 3933

[www.each.com.au](http://www.each.com.au)

Knox Community Health Service 

PH (03) 9757 6200

[www.kchs.org.au](http://www.kchs.org.au)

Monash Link Community Health Service 

PH 1300 552 509

[www.monashlink.org.au](http://www.monashlink.org.au)

Inspiro Community Health Service 

PH (03) 9738 8801 (Lilydale)

[www.inspiro.org.au](http://www.inspiro.org.au)

Whitehorse Community Health Centre 

PH (03) 9890 2220

[www.wchs.org.au](http://www.wchs.org.au)

Yarra Valley Community Health Service 

PH 1300 130 381

[www.easternhealth.org.au/yarra/yvchs](http://www.easternhealth.org.au/yarra/yvchs)

**Palliative Care Organisation, Psychologists,  
Social Workers and Counsellors**

Refer to your local telephone directory or discuss with  
Eastern Health staff

**The Compassionate Friends-Bereaved Parents  
Centre** 

For parents who have suffered the death of a  
son or daughter at any age, from any cause.

PH (03) 9888 4944 or 1800 641 091(Free call).

[www.compassionatefriendsvictoria.org.au](http://www.compassionatefriendsvictoria.org.au)

**SANDS: Still birth and Neonatal Death  
Support (Victoria)** 

A service for those affected by the death of a baby.

PH 1300 072 637

[www.sandsvic.org.au](http://www.sandsvic.org.au)

**SIDS and Kids Victoria**

PH: 1300 308 307

[www.sidsandkidsvic.org](http://www.sidsandkidsvic.org)

**Sudden Infant Death Foundation** 

A service for all those affected by the sudden and  
unexpected death

PH (03) 9822 9611

or 1300 308 307 (Free call).

**Cancer Council Victoria**

PH 13 11 20

[www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au)

For further information please contact the Social Work  
Department at any of the Eastern Health sites.

**Resource availability**

Speak to Eastern Health staff for recommendations on any new  
materials that may be available in your language.



