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Review

Clinical, educational, and epidemiological value of autopsy

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Summary

The autopsy is now often regarded as of marginal use in modern clinical practice. In this Review we contend that the autopsy remains an important procedure with substantial, if largely underused, potential to advance medical knowledge and improve clinical practice. Many doctors lack familiarity with autopsy practices, and are insufficiently aware of the benefits for not only bereaved families but also present and future patients. In this Review, which has an international perspective, we consider the ascent and decline of the autopsy, the legal frameworks that govern its use, the value and potential pitfalls of alternatives to the conventional method, and the autopsy's role in undergraduate medical education. We also draw attention to the continuing ability of autopsies to improve the completeness and reliability of death certification, which is important for public-health strategies and for some bereaved families.

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