



Necropsy Fact Sheet

What is a “Necropsy?”

- Put simply, a necropsy is the examination of an animal after death. The purpose of a necropsy is typically to determine the cause of death, or extent of disease. This involves a careful process of dissection, observation, interpretation, and documentation. A thorough knowledge of normal anatomy is critical in distinguishing lesions from normal variations. Lesions are classified by their characteristics: location, distribution, size, shape, color and consistency. Findings are documented, either in writing, photographs, or both. The information is then synthesized into a “best guess” interpretation of what the physical findings likely represent. Some findings are easily interpreted (hole in the stomach wall = gastric ulcer), while others may involve a list of likely differentials. Supplemental diagnostic tests, such as histopathology, microbiology, or serology, frequently aid in discriminating among lists of differentials.

The Importance of the Necropsy

- Necropsy contributes to the body of scientific knowledge by increasing our understanding of anatomy and physiology in health and disease.
- Necropsy complements clinical medicine. Pre-mortem diagnoses can be confirmed, refuted or augmented on the necropsy floor, providing an invaluable educational tool for both clinicians and students. In the same way, clinical medicine contributes greatly to the necropsy process - a detailed clinical history can provide clues to direct the postmortem exam.
- Necropsies save lives! They can alert us to the presence of diseases that may be transmissible to other animals (or humans!), and guide treatment decisions for at-risk individuals. Public health and regulatory veterinarians use the necropsy as a surveillance tool to monitor for emerging or foreign animal diseases. In a laboratory setting, postmortem examination is frequently used to help determine the safety and efficacy of new pharmaceuticals before they enter clinical trials.
- In some cases, necropsy findings can give comfort or closure to an owner, especially in the case of a seemingly sudden or unexplained death.
- Necropsy also serves important legal functions - photographic and written documentation of post-mortem findings is critical in cruelty and insurance investigations, and pathologists are occasionally called to testify as expert witnesses in such cases.

Necropsy vs. Autopsy?

- Traditionally, the term “necropsy” has been used to refer to a post-mortem examination on an animal species, while “autopsy” has been reserved exclusively for human patients. However, in recognition of the One Health concept, several veterinary hospitals and veterinary pathologists have recently made the switch to using the term “autopsy” to refer to animal postmortems. Not only is this term more familiar and perhaps more palatable to pet-owners, it also reinforces the concept that animal and human health are inextricably linked. Anecdotal evidence from several U.S. veterinary schools shows that pet owners are more likely to allow a postmortem examination when the word “autopsy” is used, as opposed to

“necropsy,” suggesting that use of the more “humanized” term leads to better communication between doctors and their clients. Whatever the terminology, necropsy remains a valuable tool for furthering our understanding of disease.

Resources

- Law, M., et al. "Necropsy or autopsy? It's all about communication!" *Veterinary Pathology Online* 49.2 (2012): 271-272.
- King, John McKain. [The necropsy book](#). New York State College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University, 1989.
- Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine ["Necropsy Show and Tell"](#)

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