

# Management of death at sea

A practical guide sheet for Masters

The Marine Advisory Medical Service for The Standard Club

Death comes like a thief in the night.... Sometimes with warning, sometimes without.

## Signs of death

Never consider anyone to be dead until you and others agree that:

- \* breathing has stopped. Listen with your ear right over the nose and mouth. You should feel no air coming out and should see no chest and abdominal movement. A mirror held in front of the nose and mouth will be misted by the moisture in the exhaled breath in life, but no misting will occur in death.
- \* the heart has stopped. No pulse will be felt and no heart sounds will be heard. Put your ear on the left side of the chest near the nipple and listen carefully. If you are not sure what to listen for, listen to the left chest of a living person first. To test that the circulation has stopped, tie a piece of string tightly around a finger. In life the finger becomes bluish, but in death it remains white. Slight pressure on the fingernail or lip in life will cause the area to become pale and when the pressure is released the colour is regained. In death, this will not occur.
- \* the person looks dead. The eyes become dull and the skin pale. The pupils are large and shining a bright light into the eyes does not make the pupils get smaller.

While none of the signs described above are themselves infallible, taken together there is usually little difficulty in coming to a decision.

## Mistaken death – a warning

A person who has taken large doses of certain drugs, usually sedatives or tranquillisers, or who is suffering from hypothermia may look dead, but may still be alive. Mistakes have been made. Check carefully for shallow breathing, for a pulse, for heart sounds, as described above. If you are aware of the possibilities for error you are less likely to make a mistake. The circumstances surrounding the death may help you to decide whether drug overdose or hypothermia may be possibilities.

## Cause of death

It is important to try to establish the reasons for death. Causes of death can be ascribed to two main groups: natural causes such as illnesses/injuries, which may be accidental or non-accidental.

If the person has been ill on board, records of the nature and progress of illness and of the treatment given will have been made. These records should be carefully preserved in case any further enquiries are necessary. All telemedicine consultations must be recorded. Similarly, in case of injuries, the circumstances of the incident which led to injury or injuries should be investigated and recorded. The notes made of the investigations, together with the medical records, should be carefully preserved. It must always be remembered that medico-legal enquiries will subsequently be necessary even when there are, at the time, no apparent criminal or suspicious circumstances surrounding a death. If the circumstances of death are unusual, sudden or unknown, or if there is any suspicion of criminal intent, there must be a post-mortem examination by a pathologist.

## Procedure after death

It is usually possible to retain the body until it can be examined by a pathologist at a port. Every effort must be made to retain and preserve the body until the next port of call can be reached. It is vital that as much evidence of what happened is gathered and preserved.

## When handling the deceased

Avoid direct contact with blood or body fluids from the deceased.

Observe strict personal hygiene and put on appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) including gloves, water resistant gown /plastic apron over water repellent gown, and surgical masks.

Use goggles or face shield to protect eyes if there may be splashes from bodily fluids.

Make sure any wounds are covered with waterproof bandages or dressings.

Remove personal protective equipment after handling of the deceased.

Wash hands with liquid soap and water immediately.

#### Prior to preparation of the deceased

Use a camera to take photographs which might illustrate how the death occurred, this will be helpful in any investigation. All images to remain 'in confidence' and treated in accordance with any company SOP's.

Clothing; Strip the body of all clothing, if possible without tearing or cutting it. Make a brief description of each article and note any initials or names on the garments. Any papers, wallet, money or other articles should be noted on the list. Any articles which are wet should be dried, but not laundered, and should then be put into plastic bags, sealed, labelled, and kept in a safe place for handing over to the British Consul, police or other authorities at the next port. When handing over clothing and other articles, check each item against the list and get a receipt from the person to whom they are delivered. Any other possessions of the deceased should be treated similarly. If there is going to be little delay before reaching port, leave everything undisturbed. Examine the body. If it is absolutely essential to bury the body before it is examined by a pathologist examine the body carefully (photographs are very helpful) and record the following data:

Race;

Skin colour;

Approximate or known age;

Height – straighten out the body with the legs fully extended. Make two marks on the deck, one in line with the heels, the other in line with the top of the head. Measure and record the distance between the lines;

Development of the body – note whether fat, thin, wasted, muscular etc.;

Inspect the head and face – record the length and colour of the hair; note the eyebrows and describe facial hair. The complexion should be described (for example, sunburned; pale; florid; sallow). Record the colour of the eyes and the shape of the nose. Open mouth and examine the teeth, noting whether they are sound, decayed, or missing. Dentures should be removed, cleaned and placed with the other articles kept for future examination;

inspect the rest of the body – record all birthmarks, moles, scars, or deformities from injuries. Note the exact position of all scars and describe their length and width. A diagram will help. Note whether circumcised or not. Vaccination scars should be noted.

Tattoos should be described and any words or letters noted. Record the size, position, general appearance, and colour of such tattoos. Wounds and bruises should be noted. You should try to decide whether they could explain the death. Note the exact position, depth and dimensions of all wounds. Describe the character of the wounds – clean cuts as from a knife, or ragged tears, or bullet wounds. Note any skin blackening or singeing of clothing around the entrance bullet wound. Look for an exit wound where the bullet left the body – this is always bigger than the entry wound. Feel under the skin for a bullet which may be lodged there and note the position. Look carefully for signs of bruising round wounds or if there is any escape of blood from the wound as shown by blood clots, blood staining of the surrounding skin, by blood on the clothing or by blood in the area where the body was found. This will help to distinguish injuries caused during life (which bleed) from those caused after death (which do not bleed). Note also any broken bones. External signs of disease such as boils, ulcers, varicose veins, or skin rashes, should be recorded. Remember to have all your observational notes countersigned, and to make all appropriate entries in the official log book.

#### Suspected suicide

In cases in which suicide is suspected, it is important that a detailed report is made in full, and which includes:

Any expression of intent, any reasons, circumstantial or otherwise given for the seafarers altered state of mind. Any letters or

suicide notes should be retained by the Master as key evidence. A report should be made by each crewmember who may have evidence in respect of the death. A record should also be made of any dialogue and intervention made, including that with any telemedicine facility. Records should be contemporaneous and accurate. Images should be taken of the body as found at the time of death / discovery.

### Body positioning

Lay the deceased person on their back, straighten their limbs (if possible) with their arms lying by their sides.

Place a pillow under the head as it supports alignment and helps the mouth stay closed.

Close the eyes by applying light pressure for 30 seconds.

Clean the mouth to remove debris and secretions.

Oral, nasal and rectal orifices of the deceased must be plugged to prevent leakage of body fluids.

Clean and replace dentures as soon as possible after death if necessary.

If they cannot be replaced send them with the body in a clearly identified receptacle.

Support the jaw by placing a pillow or rolled up towel underneath the chin.

### Personal items / jewellery

Remove jewellery in the presence of another person, and document.

Be aware of religious ornaments that need to remain with the deceased.

Secure any rings left on with minimal tape.

Clearly identify the deceased person with a name band on their wrist or ankle.

As a minimum the identification needs to identify their name, date of birth, address.

### Body removal

The deceased can be wrapped with a bed sheet/linen.

In ideal circumstances the deceased should be placed in a robust and leak-proof transparent plastic bag of not less than 150 cm thick, which should be zippered closed.

Deceased which is found soiled with blood or body fluids should be placed in a disposable plastic bag instead of linen.

A secondary opaque body bag to be used should, robust and have carry handles to ensure safe removal to refrigeration.

Attach an appropriate identity label to the body bag before transport to temporary 'on-board mortuary'.

### Body storage

They should be in a suitable and secure place to safeguard the security of the deceased.

The deceased should be stored in cold chambers (ship refrigerator if necessary, but not freezer) maintained at approximately +4°C. Given the importance of the temperature setting this should be supervised by an engineer, and if necessary the cook if a catering fridge is used.

NEVER allow the body to be stored at temperatures below +2°C.

Stored off the floor of the cold chamber if possible, with Identity label visible outside body bag.

## Disposal of the body

Retention for post-mortem examination.

Liaison with consular authorities as per national jurisdiction

Liaison with ships agents in next port to formalise any requirements for disembarkation of the body.

## Summary

Whenever possible a body should be retained for post-mortem examination or for burial ashore. For the sake of the deceased person's relatives and to preserve the body in the best possible condition, if there is going to be any delay in reaching port, thoroughly wash and dry the body all over. Comb out and part the hair and give attention to finger nails. Straighten the arms and legs and interlock the fingers over the thighs. Tie the ankles together to keep the feet perpendicular. Empty the bladder by firm pressure over the lower abdomen. The body should then be put into a body bag and kept in a refrigerator or cold store which will have to be set aside for the purpose. The aim is to store the body at approximately 4°C, it should not be frozen. An alternative, if near port, is to lay the naked body on ice in a bath and to cover the body with lots of ice.