



# DEATH AT SCENE

## Aims

- Describe situations where resuscitation is inappropriate
- Describe the process of pronouncing life extinct

## Background

Unexpected or sudden death should always be referred to one of Her Majesty's Coroners for investigation. Given the nature of the incidents attended by HEMS all cases will involve a Coroner. The aim of the court is to establish the place and cause of death and make recommendations to the Crown Prosecution Service or other bodies as necessary. In all of these cases it is the coroner who issues the death certificate ("certifies death") and not the attending clinician. It follows that clinicians that attend a patient who dies from trauma, can only "Pronounce Life Extinct" or "PLE".

If death occurs in a public place the ambulance service has a duty to remove it, however this must only take place after consultation with a senior police officer at the scene. If the fatality takes place at a home then theoretically the body can be left and moved by undertakers with the permission of the police however the ambulance crew may be happy to remove if the body would cause distress to other family members. Again this should only be after consultation with the police.

If a patient is in a life-threatening state you may be approached by a police officer to accompany the patient for means of continuity. It is not normal practice to do this. Instruct the officer to contact the police station nearest to the receiving hospital and ask for an officer to attend the hospital for continuity. If a patient loses their output en-route to hospital it is appropriate to continue resuscitation into the emergency room.

## **Policy**

1. All patients without signs of life should undergo resuscitation unless there is:
  - Gross injury incompatible with life e.g. decapitation
  - Reliable evidence that the patient has been without signs of life and resuscitation for more than 10 minutes. (Under these circumstances evidence should only come from medically trained personnel and even then their individual practice must be taken into account).
2. All deaths, except the following, should be seen by the HEMS registrar and assessed for signs of life:
  - Major incidents
  - Where a member of BASICS has pronounced life extinct.
3. The time at which life is pronounced extinct (PLE time) should be noted. Give the time together with your name and contact details to the police officer in charge. If there are no police on scene contact Ambulance Control to request a police presence. Document the PLE time on your own notes and the ambulance crew's paperwork. There is no legal requirement for the doctor to stay with the body until the police arrive. If you are tasked to another job you may leave the body in the care of the ambulance crew.
4. Where patients have undergone resuscitation and medical intervention leave lines and tubes in place and note any incisions (even if failed) in your clinical notes. Note the endo tracheal tube can dislodge when the body is moved, clearly note how tube position was confirmed.
5. With the permission of a senior policeman on scene the body can then be taken to the local mortuary.
6. Remember that for many on scene this will be an unusual situation. If possible speak with other drivers that may have been involved and reassure them.

## **Special Circumstances**

1. Where a child is involved, resuscitation should normally be continued to hospital.
2. Forensic examination of the scene is important but should not prevent a doctor accessing the patient to confirm life is extinct. It is not unusual to find a police officer who, understandably, focuses on the crime scene elements of the case and restricts access to the patient. In these circumstances do your best to reassure the officer that you will not undertake any unnecessary moves and limit the number of people gaining access to the body.