



## PET POST MORTEMS

*what they are and  
why they matter*

**A POST MORTEM EXAMINATION OF A PET** (also called a necropsy) is the animal equivalent of a human autopsy. It is performed by a board-certified veterinary pathologist who evaluates the deceased animal for injuries, disease, and other abnormalities and then writes up a detailed report. Though not widespread, necropsies can provide meaningful benefits for pet owners, veterinarians and the broader veterinary community as a whole.

### **What They Reveal**

A necropsy can reveal a wide range of findings, including evidence of abuse or cruelty, poisoning, medical error, improper treatment, and underlying disease. For pet owners, this can bring much-needed closure after an unexpected or unexplained loss. For veterinarians, a necropsy can provide objective confirmation that nothing of significance was missed, or that a surgical procedure was carried out correctly.

### **The Limitations**

It is important to recognize that the results of a necropsy are not always conclusive and may not provide the clear answers that families and veterinarians are hoping for. Not all animal deaths under veterinary care can be fully explained, despite extensive evaluations both in life and post mortem. Many findings may turn out to be incidental and unrelated to the cause of death. In other cases, the cause may be related to functional irregularities that leave no visible trace, such as electrical disturbances in the heart. Additionally, some diseases are below the threshold of microscopic detection in tissue, making a specific diagnosis unlikely. For all of these reasons, a necropsy should not be considered “the last word” in determining cause of death.

### **The Benefits**

Despite the limitations, a necropsy can also be extremely valuable. For pet owners grappling with grief or uncertainty, it can provide much needed information and a measure of peace. From a medical standpoint, it serves as a critical tool for determining whether the standard of care was met. In a broader sense, necropsies can contribute to the prevention of disease outbreaks and the ongoing advancement of veterinary medicine.

Necropsies can be important from a legal standpoint as well by providing objective, science-based proof of animal abuse, negligence, poisoning or malpractice, and thereby serving as crucial evidence in legal proceedings centered on such claims. Cases of animal cruelty or malpractice are inherently difficult to prove due to practical challenges like delayed case referrals or incomplete documentation. As a result, post mortem reports often represent the main source of objective evidence available in lawsuit litigation.

### **The Decision**

Generally speaking, if there are unanswered questions or concerns about the circumstances of a pet's death, a necropsy is strongly worth considering for the emotional, scientific and legal benefits it can provide. There are, however, some key points to bear in mind. First, the cost of a post mortem procedure can run anywhere from hundreds to thousands of dollars. As such, it is important to weigh the expense against the potential value that the findings may, or may not, provide. Another factor to consider is timing. It is essential that the examination be performed as soon as possible after death to avoid errors caused by tissue degradation and ensure pathological integrity. Finally, a necropsy should only be performed by a qualified, board-certified veterinary pathologist. ■

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