COVID-19 – Handling of deceased bodies by hospital staff (non-Coroners)

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For use by	Interim guidance for NSW hospital facilities and staff for handling deceased bodies with COVID 19
	To be made available as a factsheet on the NSW Health COVID-19 webpage

COVID-19 - Handling of deceased bodies by hospital staff

This interim guidance is based on what is currently known about COVID-19. The infection is spread through contact with contaminated droplets released when an infected person coughs or sneezes, or from contact with contaminated hands, surfaces or objects.

Hospital staff are unlikely to contract COVID-19 when transmission based, contact and droplet infection prevention precautions (appropriate PPE and hand hygiene) are used when handling the deceased. The following precautionary strategies must be used to minimise the risk of becoming infected with COVID-19:

- **In addition to the procedures below, routine contact and droplet infection control procedures should be maintained when handling or transferring deceased persons confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19**

- **Wear appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) at all times**

- **Avoid unnecessary manipulation of the body that may expel air or fluid from the lungs**

- **Use two leak-proof body bags (double bagged) to store and transport the body**

- **Label the outer bag "COVID-19 – Handle with care"**

- **To minimise transmission of the virus viewing of the deceased in a hospital setting is not recommended**

What is the COVID-19 virus?

COVID-19 is a new strain of coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans. It was first identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, where it has caused a large and ongoing outbreak. Cases have since been identified in several other countries, including Australia.

COVID-19 is spread through droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes, or by indirect contact with contaminated hands, surfaces or objects. People are at risk of infection if they come in close contact (face to face for at least 15 minutes or in a closed space for at least 2 hours) with someone who has COVID-19.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Hospital personnel should employ infection prevention and control measures and avoid unnecessary handling of deceased bodies to decrease the risk of transmission of COVID-19 from deceased persons infected with the virus.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) must always be used when preparing the deceased body. The Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infection in Healthcare recommends applying transmission-based precautions when providing care for patients. Persons in close contact with the body must wear:

- a clean protective outer garment, such as a gown

- disposable gloves

- a disposable surgical mask

- appropriate eye protection such as safety glasses or a face shield.

After use, PPE should be carefully removed and decontaminated or disposed into general waste as soon as practicable.

Viewing of the deceased in a clinical unit or ward

Family viewing of the deceased is not recommended for a deceased patient known or suspected to have COVID-19.

Family members should not touch or kiss the deceased. If family members touch the body, they should wash their hands with soap and water immediately afterwards or use an alcohol-based hand rub. Gloves are not necessary unless there are visible bodily fluids present on the body.

Viewing of the deceased in the hospital mortuary

No viewings are to be held after the body bag has been closed for storage and transported to the mortuary.

Aerosol generating procedures

The potential for airborne spread of COVID-19 is still unknown. Aerosol generating procedures should be avoided if possible. Airborne precautions should be employed when performing aerosol generating procedures, such as removing tracheal tubes.

Airborne precautions include:

- Fluid resistant long-sleeved gown

- P2/N95 respirator (mask) – should be fit checked with each use

- face shield or safety glasses

- disposable nonsterile gloves when in contact with patient

- hand hygiene before donning and after removing gloves

For more information, visit http://www.cec.health.nsw.gov.au/keep-patients-safe/infection-prevention-and-control/transmission-based-precautions.

Preparing deceased bodies with COVID-19

All deceased patients should be treated with the utmost dignity and respect. For all non-Coroner's cases the following is recommended to care for the body:

- Avoid unnecessary manipulation of the body that may expel air from the lungs

- Remove any mechanical aids or drainage tubes

- Cover any wounds with a waterproof dressing

- Remove all patient valuables and record in a property registry as per facility protocol

- Complete local identification requirements and affix mortuary tags, information tags and external toggles

- Use **two** leak-proof body bags (double bagged) to store and transport the body

- Label the outer bag "COVID-19 – Handle with care"

- Practice hand hygiene practices before and after contact with the body

- Perform regular environmental decontamination including all surfaces and equipment.

Certifying deaths due to COVID-19

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has published a guide advising how COVID-19 deaths should be recorded on the death certificate.

Further information

Contact your local Public Health Unit by calling 1300 066 055

NSW Health COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus) webpage

Clinical Excellence Commission – Coronavirus COVID-19

Australian Bureau of Statistics - Guidance for Certifying Deaths due to COVID-19