Bereavement Information
for the United States

Prepared by
British Consular Services United States

www.gov.uk/government/world/usa

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The death of a relative or friend is always distressing and if it happens abroad the distress can be made worse by practical problems. Consular Directorate in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the British Embassy and Consulates General in the United States are ready to help in any way that they can. You may be uncertain what to do next or who to contact for advice. These notes are designed to help you through the practical arrangements you will need to make. While care has been taken in compiling these notes, no legal liability for their contents is accepted by the British Embassy or Consulates General in the United States or HM Government.

You should be aware that procedures in the United States might differ to those in the United Kingdom. While we understand your need to make arrangements as quickly as possible, this may not always be possible.

The use of the terms body, body parts, remains, deceased etc. are not meant to offend you in any way. We realise that we are referring to your loved one and we mean no disrespect to the person you have lost.

STANDARD PROCEDURES
In the United States it is not necessary for the deceased to be identified by the next of kin. Identification can be carried out by means of documentation such as a passport or driving licence, fingerprints, dental records or DNA. This process could take up to a few months.

In general American undertakers are modern, well-equipped companies and used to working with foreigners.

Following the death of a British national in the United States, their next of kin, or a formally appointed representative, must decide whether to repatriate the deceased to the UK, or carry out a local burial or cremation. If the deceased was covered by travel insurance, it is important for next of kin to contact the insurance company without delay. If there is no insurance cover, the cost of repatriation or burial will need to be met by the family. Neither the Foreign and Commonwealth Office nor our Embassy or Consulates General in the United States have budgets to meet these costs.

If the next of kin is in the UK the country case work team, based in the Consular Directorate in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the UK, will assist the family and discuss with them how they wish to proceed with the cremation or burial, where they wish this to take place and details of who is taking responsibility for the costs involved.

If the deceased was travelling with a tour operator, they can be a valuable source of assistance and advice.

REPATRIATION
If the deceased is covered by travel insurance, the insurance company will normally have a standing agreement with an international funeral director in the UK to arrange repatriations. If the deceased is not covered by insurance, the next of kin will need to appoint an undertaker in the United States or an international funeral director themselves.

Some local undertakers in the United States are equipped to carry out repatriation procedures and will provide the special caskets required for the international carriage of human remains.
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Documentation such as a local civil registry death certificate, a certificate of embalming/cremation may be required to transfer remains to the UK. If necessary, the undertaker will arrange this.

In certain circumstances immediate repatriation may not always be possible. Our consular staff will try and inform next of kin as soon as possible if this is the case.

For additional information visit our guide on [Gov.UK for death abroad](https://www.gov.uk/country-specific-advice/death-abroad).

TRANSPORTATION OF HUMAN REMAINS
It is best to check either the TSA [Transporting the Deceased guidance](https://www.tsa.gov/travel/human-remains) or airport authorities’ guidance regarding transportation and shipping of human remains.

LOCAL CREMATION
Cremation is common practice in the United States and there are modern, well equipped, crematoria. If next of kin choose local cremation and wish to take the ashes back to the UK themselves, they can do so with minimal bureaucracy. However, when transporting ashes passengers should check in advance with the airline about specific airline restrictions.

INQUESTS
If the circumstances of the death were not unusual (see below), obtaining the death certificate can be expeditious and straightforward. However, if a Medical Examiner is not satisfied after a preliminary examination of the facts, a post-mortem may be required. Further investigations and interviews with witnesses may also be called for before a decision is made as to cause of death.

In cases of sudden or unexpected death, whether by accident or misadventure, or where a person dies alone, the Medical Examiner will prepare a report of his investigation after which the deceased will be released for burial, cremation or repatriation. Official reports will be retained by the Court and may only be released to the next of kin. However, if death was caused by a criminal act, the police will be ordered to conduct a full investigation. The Prosecutor will then decide whether to prosecute. This can delay the release of the body for burial, cremation or repatriation.

POST-MORTEMS
Post-mortems are carried out by court appointed forensic doctors. During a post-mortem, small tissue samples and organs may be removed and retained for testing, including toxicological studies, at the discretion of the doctor, without consent of next of kin. The deceased cannot be buried or cremated in the United States or returned to the UK before tests on removed organs are completed.

CLOTHING AND PERSONAL BELONGINGS
No universal procedures of handling clothing exist in the United States. Circumstances generally depend on the situation.

Personal belongings found on the deceased at the time of death are generally returned through the Medical Examiner's office.

ORGAN DONATION
There are 58 organ procurement organizations (OPOs) in the United States. Each state in the United States has an office, which deals with organ donation. OPOs are responsible for two main
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functions within their designated services area: 1) increasing the number of registered donors, and 2) coordinating the donation process when actual donors become available.

When actual donors become available, OPOs will follow their established guidelines and processes. They also provide bereavement support for donor families and volunteer opportunities for interested individuals.

You can find more information on the Organ Procurement Organization web site as well as the starting the organ donation process web page.

DONATION OF BODIES TO MEDICAL SCIENCE
A body donation can be conducted at the time of death, or can form part of a person’s last will and testament.

It is a very straightforward process that begins with a telephone call to a body donation programme. Most accredited university medical schools in the United States run this type of programme and would need to be contacted following an internet subject search for the respective state. Hospitals will be of great assistance with donations of bodies to medical science.

The organization or institution you opt to donate with will determine how the registration and donation programme works. When a death occurs and the body is to be donated to science, a donation company should be contacted immediately. They will arrange to collect the deceased from the place of death, coordinate the anatomical donation, and arrange the cremation of the deceased following the donation.

CONSULAR DEATH REGISTRATION AND LOCAL DEATH CERTIFICATE
There is no legal obligation for the death overseas of a British national to be registered with the UK authorities. However, there are the advantages that a British style death certificate is then available and that a record of the death is afterwards held at the General Register Office in the UK.

To apply you should see the information on our website. Alternatively you can contact:
Consular Overseas Residents Services Unit Room K4.9
King Charles Street
LONDON
SW1A 2AH
or e-mail bmdenquiries@fco.gov.uk with specific enquiries.

A registration cannot, in any case, be made without presenting the death certificate issued by the local civil authorities. The death certificate issued by the local authorities will be sufficient for all purposes in the UK.

BRITISH PASSPORT CANCELLATION
In order to avoid identity fraud a deceased person's passport should be sent to the British Embassy in the United States or passport office in the UK for cancellation. Next of kin can request the passport to be returned. Likewise if the passport has been lost or mislaid, relatives should get in contact with either the British Embassy or passport office for instructions on reporting the loss of the passport.