

Complex Decedent Management Procedures in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Experiences from a Military Hospital's Department of Pathology

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Summary:

Until the end of March, 2022, more than 45000 people lost their lives related to SARS-CoV-2 infection in Hungary. The Medical Centre, Hungarian Defence Forces became a designated hospital for the treatment of patients with COVID-19 disease in November, 2020. With the increased influx of SARS-CoV-2 infected patients, our hospital not only had to deal with the treatment of patients, but also had to manage the increased number of the deceased.

Methods-Results:

During the pre-COVID period of 2015-2019, the average number of decedents was around 2000 per annum; in 2020 this number did not change significantly in our hospital. However, there was a 44% increase in 2021. The uneven distribution and the high number of fatalities represented a great challenge to manage, especially regarding the safe storage of bodies, while also respecting ethical and religious considerations. Close co-operation with clinicians and actors of the death care industry helped to maintain the continuous flow of work.

Without a BSL-3 autopsy room, we also had to work out a concept which enabled us to perform autopsies, as these procedures were inevitable in certain circumstances, especially in vaccinated cases. The basics of our COVID-19 decedent management procedures were published in Hungarian, in April, 2020. [1] In October, 2020, the most important elements to perform autopsies in safety were also established, keeping the key aspects of isolation, air ventilation, decontamination and personal protective equipment choices in mind, while also maintaining cost efficiency. The team composition and organization of work we utilized was similar to the concept published by Skok et al. [2]

Overall, 1339 COVID-19 cases had to be managed during the first 5 waves of the pandemic. Among our staff, we did not identify a single SARS-CoV-2 infection that could have a connection to pathology procedures.

Conclusions:

Epidemics related to hazardous biological agents can represent a significant difficulty in decedent operations. Managing the journey of deceased people from the location of death to the final resting place requires multidisciplinary co-operation, especially in the fields of transportation, storage, and during specific post mortem procedures.

References:

[1] Farkas CsB, Petrétai D, Babinszky G, Dudás G, Szabó G, Bognár Cs, Jäckel M. [Role of duties related to COVID-19 suspected, probable and confirmed fatality cases]. *Orv Hetil.* 2020; 161(17): 713–722.

[2] Skok K, Vander K, Setaffy L, Kessler HH, Aberle S, Bargfrieder U, Trauner M, Lax SF. COVID-19 autopsies: Procedure, technical aspects and cause of fatal course. Experiences from a single-center. *Pathol Res Pract.* 2021; 217: 153305

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