



The Royal College of **Pathologists**

Pathology: the science behind the cure

## Object 32: Autopsy instruments



### What are they?

A post mortem (also known as an autopsy) is an examination of the body after death, usually performed to establish the cause of death. A set of specialised instruments is used to perform a post mortem. These are similar to the instruments that a surgeon uses during an operation and include a scalpel, a larger knife called a PM40, forceps for gripping tissue, ladles for removing and measuring body fluids, a long bladed knife for slicing organs and specialised scissors (called an enterotome) for opening the bowel.

### History

The first post mortems were performed in Ancient Greece. They have been performed by most civilisations throughout history and the instruments used have changed relatively little over hundreds of years.

### Pathology

Histopathologists are the doctors who perform post mortems. The majority of post mortems in the UK are done at the request of the Coroner, whose job it is to establish who died and when, where and how they died. Around 20% of people who die each year have a post mortem to find out why they died.

### Find out more

A great way to find out more about post mortems is to attend a 'virtual autopsy', in which a pathologist describes the process using a (live) model. You may be able to handle some of the instruments used, or watch a pig's organs being dissected. Several virtual autopsies are being held as part of National Pathology Week – visit the [RCPath website](#) to see if there's one near you.