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The dead do not remain silent: the Hamburg way

>> Pandemics are nothing new. That is why emergency plans for these exceptional times have been in place for many years. The main objectives of all measures must therefore be to reduce morbidity and mortality rates and to maintain healthcare and public order. The federal and state governments were called upon to agree on a comprehensive monitoring and reporting system and to try to narrow down the risk potential of a new virus through studies.

In connection with Covid-19, the RKI initially declared not only the sick but also the dead to be lepers, as it were. The following recommendation was made in March 2020: 'An internal post-mortem examination, autopsies or other aerosol-producing measures should be avoided. If these are necessary, they should be kept to a minimum. (...)

A crematorium post-mortem (2nd post-mortem examination) harbours an additional risk of infection. A strict risk/benefit assessment should therefore be carried out before it is performed.' This recommendation of the RKI is interpreted and applied by all those who deal with the subject of death in Germany, i.e. authorities, hospitals, pathologists, undertakers and churches. The sick, the dying and the dead are all quarantined. For relatives, this means They are not allowed to say goodbye to the deceased. After death, the deceased are packed as quickly as possible in plastic bags, so-called body bags, in order to be transported efficiently from the living area and the hospitals to the cemetery and crematorium under high security precautions.

Personally, I think this attitude is wrong. For me, it is simply ignorance, if not playing with death. Because as long as we don't understand dying, we can't protect the living. It bothers me immensely that there is no strategy for dealing with deaths. The recommendation to avoid autopsies is, in my view, anti-scientific and hinders insights into the cause and consequences of Covid-19. And how are the dead supposed to infect us anyway?

Corpses don't move. They don't breathe, they don't cough, they don't sneeze. Simple hygiene rules, which are generally applied during post-mortems anyway, are enough to protect them. It annoys me. I want action instead of a death reflex. I want to read the deceased like a book. This could possibly lead to guidelines for our lives and survival. That's what matters.

This is how what is now known as the 'Hamburg way' came about: Contrary to the original, later revised recommendations of the RKI, we autopsied the bodies of all people who are considered 'corona dead' in Hamburg in the first months of the corona year 2020. We have found many parallels in the autopsies of corona deaths. Apart from the ultimately fatal coronavirus infections of the respiratory tract and lungs, the deceased had extremely serious pre-existing conditions. The average age of the deceased is over 80 years. We have realised that the virus is nevertheless versatile. Ultimately, it affects all internal organs.

Evolution of the norm The initiative from Hamburg in particular led to the legislature adopting the official obligation under the Infection Protection Act (IfSG) right at the start of the pandemic. With effect from 23 May 2020, the legislator amended Section 25, para. 4, sentence 2 IfSG, in which the 'may' provision was changed to a 'shall' provision. Since then, the competent authority (via the health authorities) would have to order the post-mortem if this achieves the stated purpose of 'combating communicable diseases in humans'. With its new regulation, the legislator provided an impetus to actually utilise the instrument of official obduction in the context of the acute pandemic.

With a second amendment to the Infection Protection Act, a further amendment to Section 25 IfSG came into force on 1 June 2021, namely that the public health department should also order post-mortems if 'it can be assumed that someone has suffered damage to their health as a result of a vaccination or other measure of specific prophylaxis'.

Impressions from the application of the law

What practice did this legal situation lead to? A pilot study carried out as part of the Network of University Medicine (NUM) found that around 80% of the post-mortems commissioned by health authorities were carried out in Hamburg. Autopsies obviously remained a marginal issue. An incipient but only extremely sporadic ordering of post-mortems with regard to the implications of immunisation became apparent. However, it is by no means the case that deaths in connection with immunisations were regularly or comprehensively autopsied. On the contrary. What remains is the sad realisation that Section 25, para. 4, sentence 2 IfSG is by no means a 'working paragraph', but rather a regulation that is barely known and avoided in practice. This practice does not allow us to expect so-called pandemic preparedness, including regularly performed sections in the event of dangerous or new infections.

My conclusion today from the perspective of forensic medicine: a declaration of bankruptcy! There is no active investigation of the dead with an unclear cause of death and an unclear infection. In particular, there is no interest whatsoever in ordering a post-mortem examination of the dead with a proven SARS-CoV-2 infection. There is also no clarification if the death occurs in temporal connection with a vaccination that has taken place. Lesson learnt? - Answer: 'absolutely not!' Nevertheless: The NATional Autopsy Network (NATON) of pathologists and forensic pathologists has developed positively during the pandemic. <<

Literature

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