

MIDNIGHT LAW

Maintaining Safety and Confidence in the Diagnosis of Death using Neurological Criteria



BACKGROUND

- In the United Kingdom, human death is defined as the irreversible loss of the capacity for consciousness combined with the irreversible loss of the ability to breathe. Irreversible cessation of brainstem function produces this clinical state and death may be diagnosed using circulatory or neurological criteria¹.
- To maintain confidence and safety in the diagnosis of death using neurological criteria (DNC) it is essential that guidance endorsed by professional bodies is followed².

POINTS TO CONSIDER

- DNC requires the presence of an irreversible structural brain injury followed by the completion of two essential steps:
 1. Confirming the patient meets certain preconditions to ensure the clinical state is not treatable or reversible.
 2. Undertaking a series of clinical tests to confirm the absence of brainstem function.
- Whilst the tests in step 2 demonstrate absence of function, its irreversibility is dependent on the assessment in step 1.
- Step 1 requires the patient to be deeply comatose and apnoeic as a result of an irreversible, untreatable brain injury of known aetiology with any factor potentially contributing to the clinical state excluded.

CLINICAL TESTING

- Should not be undertaken:
 1. <6h after the loss of the last brainstem reflex.
 2. <24h after the loss of the last brainstem reflex where the aetiology is primarily a hypoxic brain injury.
 3. <24h after restoration of normothermia following therapeutic hypothermia
- Two doctors each perform the clinical tests, ideally whilst being observed by the other. The time of the completion of the first set of tests is the legal time of death.
- Practical guidance and videos on how to perform the tests in adults, children, and neonates are available online³.

PITFALLS

- Diagnostic caution is advised in the following 'red flag' groups⁴:

Patients with any neuromuscular disorder	Patients who have received prolonged fentanyl infusions	Patients who received steroids for the treatment of space occupying lesions such as abscesses
Patients who have had a therapeutic decompressive craniectomy	Where the aetiology is primarily related to the brain stem or posterior fossa	

- When uncertainty exists around the presence of confounding factors or ability to undertake the clinical tests the process should be paused, expert advice gained, and consideration given to the use of ancillary investigations.

EXTRA CORPOREAL MEMBRANE OXYGENATION (ECMO)

- Drug sequestration in the extracorporeal circuit and difficulties in undertaking the apnoea test are challenging, but do not preclude DNC. Recently published guidance describes how to conduct testing whilst on ECMO.⁵

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. It is the duty of each of the two doctors to be satisfied with the aetiology, the exclusion of all potentially reversible causes, the clinical tests of brain-stem function and of any ancillary investigations; so that each doctor may independently confirm DNC.
2. The timing of the tests should be appropriate for the reassurance of all those directly concerned. If in doubt, wait and seek advice.

FURTHER READING

1. Academy of Medical Royal Colleges. A code of practice for the diagnosis and confirmation of death. Academy of Royal Colleges; 2008.
2. Gardiner D, Manara A. Form for the Diagnosis of Death using Neurological Criteria (full guidance version).
3. Diagnosing death using neurological criteria. ODT Clinical 2018.
4. Thomas I, Manara A. Pitfalls in the Diagnosis of Death Using Neurological Criteria. BJA Ed. Vol 20:1. Jan 2020.
5. Meadows CIS, Toolan M, Slack A et al. Diagnosis of death using neurological criteria in adult patients on extracorporeal membrane oxygenation: development of UK guidance. J Intensive Care Soc 2019.