

NT Health Responses to written questions on notice

1. For how long can a body be stored in an NT morgue? Is this time limit articulated in legislation, regulation or policy?

The maximum time period for keeping a deceased adult, neonate or stillborn child in the mortuary will be three months unless exceptional circumstances present. The maximum time for non-adults is up to six months.

The three month time limit is articulated in NT Health Services guidelines and policy.

2. How many deceased babies have been left in NT morgues for longer than 3 months?

- a. What were the circumstances of those babies (that is, was the baby Indigenous or non-Indigenous, and what was the cause of the baby's death)?**

Answer to question on notice received in-camera

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- 3. The committee heard evidence in Katherine about Indigenous families that have suffered a stillbirth and the support available to them. The committee was advised that Katherine Hospital has one social worker and one Aboriginal Liaison Officer (ALO) in total.**

- a. Is this level of resourcing sufficient to meet the needs of families attending Katherine Hospital, particularly families who suffer a stillbirth?**

There is no standard benchmark for Social Worker or ALO levels in hospitals. Katherine Hospital currently has one ALO position and one social worker position.

Grief and loss support is one of the key services provided by the Katherine Hospital Social Worker and ALO, with services prioritised based on relative need. The staff also work and connect with other services in Katherine to ensure patients are able to receive appropriate follow up in the community post discharge. Resources around support for loss is provided to families, this includes pamphlets for Sids and Kids and SANDS.

- b. If not, what will the NT government do to increase resourcing at Katherine hospital?**

Northern Territory Health is constantly looking to improve the quality of care and to ensure it is culturally safe. Any changes to service models needs to be carefully considered to ensure a comprehensive approach is taken. Our geographical dispersion and culturally diverse population can make engaging with families more challenging. The way in which families are engaged and supported needs to be done in a way that enhances the quality of care. This could include utilising existing resources and appropriate cultural pathways to support enhanced engagement.

- 4. The committee was told that until two months ago, there were six babies still in the Katherine morgue, two since 2013. At present, there are still three babies in the morgue.**

- a. How does the NT government intend to engage with the families of the three babies still in Katherine morgue?**

Procedures for staff in relation to stillborn babies have been well-documented, with staff in hospitals and the Primary Health Care setting having clear protocols in the management of stillbirths and the storage of bodies. Every endeavour is made by all staff to support families and assist with burial plans.

Social Workers and Aboriginal Liaison Officers undertake the primary role associated with bodies which have been admitted to a mortuary with no determination established in relation to their burial.

The Katherine Hospital Social Worker and Aboriginal Liaison Officer have consulted and worked in partnership with Katherine region non-government organisations to assist with engaging with the families of the babies to enable burial.

The organising of baby burials regarding timeframe and processes involved are complex and culturally sensitive; which require delicate management so that we consistently demonstrate respect for Indigenous cultural belief and practice.

- b. In the future, how does the NT government intend to engage with and support Indigenous families who suffer a stillbirth in a culturally appropriate way?**

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New guidelines called 'Notifying and Supporting the Next of Kin' have been developed to better support and manage situations where family may be undecided on how to manage a body. These guidelines have been piloted at Royal Darwin Hospital for the past 12 months.

The Guidelines outline the roles and responsibilities of the Social Worker and how they may provide assistance. The guidelines are being reviewed for applicability to other hospitals. The policy framework for the morgues is also being reviewed to ensure a comprehensive approach is taken to engage with families.