



British Embassy
Panama

Bereavement Information for Panama

Prepared by
British Embassy Panama
www.gov.uk/government/world/panama

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BEREAVEMENT INFORMATION

The death of a relative or friend is always distressing. But if it happens abroad the distress can be made worse by practical problems. You may be uncertain what to do next or who to contact for advice. Should a death occur in Panama, the British Embassy and the Consular Directorate in the Foreign & Commonwealth Office is ready to help in any way we can. These notes are designed to help you through the practical arrangements you will need to make. While care has been taken in compiling these notes, no legal liability for their contents is accepted by the British Embassy Panama or HM Government.

You should be aware that Panamanian procedures differ significantly to those in the United Kingdom. While we understand your need to make arrangements as quickly as possible, this may not always be possible.

STANDARD PROCEDURES

In Panama it is not normally necessary for the deceased to be identified by the next of kin. Identification can be carried out by means of documentation such as a passport or driving license. If the death is accidental or suspicious, the Panamanian Police will be involved and they will usually, but not always, inform the British Embassy Panama.

Following the death of a British national in Panama, their next of kin, or a formally appointed representative must decide whether to repatriate the deceased to the UK, or carry out a local burial or cremation. If the deceased was covered by travel insurance, it is important for next of kin to contact the insurance company without delay. If there is no insurance cover, the cost of repatriation or burial will need to be met by the family. Neither the Foreign and Commonwealth Office nor the British Embassy in Panama have a budget to meet these costs.

If the next of kin is in the UK, they will be able to liaise directly with our colleagues in Consular Directorate in London, informing them of how they wish to proceed with the cremation or repatriation and details of who is taking responsibility for the costs involved.

It is important to remember that if the deceased was travelling with a tour operator, they can be a valuable source of assistance and advice. There are Funeral companies in Panama who have worked with British nationals and have English speaking staff. Our consular staff can provide [a list of funeral directors](#).

STORAGE

The deceased will normally be held at a local hospital or public morgue. However, you should be aware that storage facilities could vary depending on the part of the country. Most morgues will not be the same standard as those in the UK. Although we will do everything we possibly can do to ensure that the deceased is placed in appropriate storage we cannot guarantee the condition of the body.

REPATRIATION

If the deceased is covered by travel insurance, the insurance company will normally have a standing agreement with an international Funeral Director in the UK to arrange repatriations. If the deceased is not covered by insurance, the next of kin will need to appoint a Funeral Director in Panama or an International Funeral Director themselves. [A list of funeral directors](#) in Panama is available on our website. Local Funeral Directors in Panama are equipped to carry out repatriation procedures and will provide the special caskets required for the international carriage of human remains. Documentation such as a local death certificate, a certificate of embalming, and a certificate giving permission to transfer the remains to the UK may be required to ship the remains. This will be arranged by the Panamanian Funeral Director. Local formalities vary depending on the circumstances under which the deceased died and local bureaucracy. The Funeral Director can advise on time frames.

In certain circumstances immediate repatriation may not always be possible. Our consular staff will try and inform next of kin as soon as possible if this is the case.

LOCAL CREMATION

Local Funeral Directors can help with arranging the cremation. A local death certificate, a letter from Next of Kin giving permission to cremate, copy of the deceased's passport, passport photos and a 'no objection' letter from the British Embassy Panama are required in order to carry out the cremation. If the next of kin choose to have a local cremation and take back the ashes to the UK themselves, they can do so with minimum bureaucracy.

Funeral Director can advise on the procedure. If this is not possible they can arrange the necessary paper work for the return of the ashes to the UK.

LOCAL BURIAL

A local burial is possible. If next of kin do not own or buy a plot of land at a private cemetery in Panama where they will bury the deceased they will need to enlist the services of an undertaker who can apply to the Local authorities for permission to bury in the government/local cemetery. A fee may be charged for this.

If the death was accidental, or happened under suspicious circumstances a legal post mortem report, burial permit and acknowledgement from next of kin will be required before burial. The Funeral Director can arrange all the above.

POLICE/JUDICIAL INQUIRIES

The Police investigate all accidental or suspicious deaths. As well as examining the scene of the death, they will take statements from witnesses, and also interview family and/or friends of the deceased who are present in the country.

If the police apprehend a suspect in a case of suspicious death, he/she will probably be remanded in custody whilst the police conduct an investigation. It usually takes several months (sometimes years) before a case comes to court for a full hearing.

If the circumstances of the death are not considered unusual by the police, registration of the death is permitted and the body will be released for repatriation or cremation within a few days.

However if the police are not satisfied after the preliminary examination of the facts, an autopsy may be required. Further investigations and interviews with witnesses may also be called for. The autopsy (post-mortem report) is usually available within a month after the death has occurred but this is not always the case. There may be delays.

AUTOPSIES

Certified pathologists carry out autopsies. During an autopsy, organs may be removed for testing, including toxicological studies, at the discretion of the pathologist, **without** consent from the next of kin. The autopsy report is usually available after the post mortem is carried

out. In some instances we have experienced great delays in getting the autopsy report. Some pathologists will charge for carrying out an autopsy.

UK CORONERS

The Coroner in England and Wales is obliged in law to hold an inquest into the cause of any unnatural or violent death of a person whose remains physically lie in his or her area, even if the death occurred overseas and a post-mortem has already been carried out before repatriation of the remains to the UK.

In some countries the cause of death is not given on the death certificate and Coroners do not generally have access to judicial files from other countries. Consequently Coroners may order a second post mortem (ie subsequent to the first post mortem carried out abroad), as part of the inquest and it is at this stage that families are made aware that organs have been removed and not replaced.

Coroners can request copies of post-mortem and police reports from the Panamanian authorities through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London. However, these may only be provided once any judicial proceedings are completed. In some instances this can take many months.

In Scotland, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) deals with the investigation of all sudden, suspicious, accidental, unexpected and unexplained deaths which occur in Scotland. However, the COPFS does not have the jurisdiction to investigate deaths that occur outside Scotland apart from in a few limited circumstances. Generally, those circumstances include terrorism, cases where the death may have been caused in Scotland but the person died outside Scotland and cases where the death was as a result of murder or culpable homicide caused by another British citizen or subject. Coroners in Northern Ireland are not obliged to hold an inquest into cause of death. However, next of kin can apply for a judicial review if no inquest is held. There will be no Coroner's inquest when the remains are buried or cremated locally.

CLOTHING AND PERSONAL BELONGINGS

The deceased's clothing is normally destroyed during the post mortem examination and on some occasions it is retained as evidence and is not returned until the court case is finished. Personal belongings found on the deceased at the time of death are either handed over to the family if they are present or taken by the police to be handed over to the court.

RELEASE OF INFORMATION BY AUTHORITIES TO THE FAMILY

Access to information concerning a death, other than post-mortem and police reports, is restricted. The Panamanian authorities will not provide this information directly to next of kin. Requests for this information should be made through a legal representative. Our consular staff can provide a list of English speaking lawyers in Panama. The release of any information can take months.

CONSULAR DEATH REGISTRATION AND LOCAL DEATH CERTIFICATE

There is no legal obligation for the death overseas of a British national to be registered with the British Embassy. However, there are the advantages that a British style death certificate is then available and that a record of the death is afterwards held at the General Register Office in the UK.

To apply you should see the information on our website: <https://www.gov.uk/register-a-death>
A death certificate is not issued automatically; an application must be lodged and a fee of £105 paid for the registration and if you want a copy of the death certificate, you need to pay an additional fee of £65.

A registration cannot, in any case, be made without presenting the death certificate issued by the Panamanian authorities. The death certificate issued by the local authorities will be sufficient for all purposes in the UK. A local Death Certificate can also be obtained from the local Funeral Director.

BRITISH PASSPORT CANCELLATION

In order to avoid identity fraud a deceased person's passport should be sent to the British Embassy in Panama for cancellation along with form D01. Next of kin can request the passport to be returned. Likewise if the passport has been lost or mislaid, relatives should contact with us for instructions on reporting the loss of the passport.