

AHL LabNote Number 2

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Tips for practitioners for field postmortems

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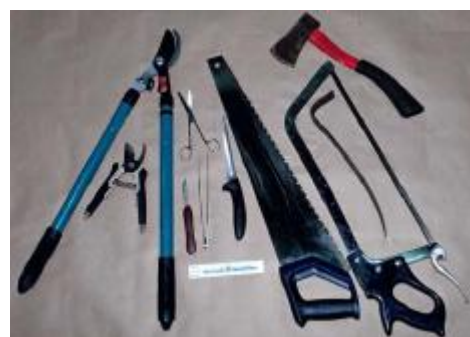
Postmortem examination (autopsy, necropsy) of domestic animals is often conducted on farms. The reasons for this procedure could be to confirm a clinical diagnosis, to make a diagnosis in cases that died prior to veterinary care, as a quality control measure for vaccination and other disease prevention or treatment measures, to fulfil the requirements of an insurance claim, or to provide evidence for a medico-legal case.

There are a number of important considerations prior to tackling a field postmortem. These include the special sampling and documentation required for legal and insurance cases and cases involving poisoning. Particularly in medico-legal cases, ensure that the postmortem can be conducted and observations and conclusions drawn with complete objectivity, as this will affect the credibility of the results to the animal owner or recipient of the postmortem report. Pathogen dissemination, particularly of zoonotic agents, and disposal of the carcass and body parts should be considered in the decision to proceed with the postmortem, the choice of location and the protective clothing worn. In the case of suspected reportable diseases, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency must always be contacted prior to starting. Note that since 2015, there have been significant changes in the rabies program. Rabies is still a federally reportable disease; however, suspect cases are no longer reported to CFIA, but rather to the local Public Health officer or OMAFRA, depending on whether there has been human or animal exposure.

The 3 B's of the field postmortem are:

1. **Be prepared** - Set aside time to do the job properly. Have appropriate equipment on hand and ready to use, which could include:

- a dedicated clean postmortem kit (see photo)
- a container and disinfectant for cleaning instruments before they are removed from the farm
- sampling supplies for histology, microbiology, etc.
- a supplementary source of light (if the area is poorly lit, you could miss lesions)
- ice packs and containers for preserving the samples until they reach the point of shipping
- a waterproof disinfectant or disposable ground sheet to place the carcass on
- resources such as the *AHL User's Guide*
- a digital or other type of camera to obtain images that can supplement written postmortem observations. These are particularly important for documentation of insurance and medico-legal cases.



2. **Be systematic** - Follow the same procedure and examine tissues in the same order for each postmortem. This ensures that nothing is missed, and that incidental or secondary lesions are not over-interpreted.

3. **Be thorough** - Doing a problem-oriented postmortem does not mean that the other body systems do not need to be examined. A checklist may be a useful guide to ensure that all systems have been examined and observations are recorded.

