

**LONDON/BRUSSELS – 22 March 2015:** The European Critical Care Foundation (ECCF) in collaboration with Imperial College London recently held a meeting on the decline of autopsies and implications for the care of critically ill patients. Hosted by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the debate brought together critical care doctors and healthcare professionals, pathologists and medical imaging specialists, religious, philosophical and legal perspectives, public health officials and other concerned stakeholders to identify the reasons for the decline, and ask whether it matters.

Professor John Martin, Chairman of ECCF said “Autopsies have been declining across Europe for more than 30 years now. The reasons for the decline are multi-factorial – they are a complex interplay of cultural attitudes, professional practices, organisational, economic and other factors, all set in the context of rapidly advancing medical diagnostic and imaging techniques and constricting healthcare budgets. However doctors and scientists across Europe are beginning to ask whether important information about cause of death, that only autopsies can provide, isn’t being lost”.

There are many reasons why even the most thorough ante-mortem investigations cannot provide a conclusive cause of death. These include such things as the characteristics and evolution of the disease itself, to conditions mimicking each other, to opportunistic infections and to the impact of medical treatment itself on the patient’s condition. As a result there is now a large body of research that reveals significant discrepancies between autopsy and clinical findings. However understanding of the exact cause of death is important - important for families seeking closure on the death of a relative, important for doctors to improve clinical practices and important for public health officials responsible for organising care.

Commenting on the discussions, Professor Peter Furness, member of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, consultant pathologist and honorary professor of renal pathology said “The meeting was fascinating because it punctured so many misconceptions. Doctors think that modern diagnostic methods mean an autopsy won’t find anything unexpected; they also think that bereaved relatives will refuse to give consent. They’re usually wrong on both counts. Getting the cause of death right is important, for society and for those who are grieving. I think doctors should be more honest when what they put on the death certificate is merely their best guess. When that happens, relatives should be offered the option of a post-mortem examination, to obtain certainty. If no-one asks, the whole concept of ‘informed consent’ is not being applied”.

Professor Ilmo Leivo, Secretary General of the European Society of Pathology added “How on earth can we improve quality and safety of care if we don’t know why patients have died? An action plan is needed that will ensure that critically ill patients of the future, medical science and healthcare systems continue to benefit from the information and learning that autopsy-based research can provide.”

The group of expert speakers and delegates reflected on what is missing at present. Dr Mike Osborn of Imperial College London who chaired the meeting said “Many issues need to be addressed to reverse the decline of autopsies - healthcare professionals need better education and training in requesting consent, trainee doctors need to be reminded of the value of autopsies for medical education and research, and the pathology profession itself has much work to do to develop and share best practices in the field. The medical profession and healthcare policymakers need to address this urgently”.

Summarising the day, Professor Martin said “Ultimately this is about helping to prevent the untimely death and suffering of others, be they our own families, our friends or future generations. Autopsies may enable the deceased to give one final gift to the living”.

**About the European Critical Care Foundation:**

The European Critical Care Foundation, ECCF, was established to improve understanding of the organisation and delivery of critical care, raise awareness of factors that lead to unequal and inequitable outcomes, and trigger action across Europe to overcome those barriers. To learn more, please visit the website at [www.euroccf.org](http://www.euroccf.org) or contact Helen Brewer, Foundation Manager, tel +32 496 285 664.