

# An Accurate and Timely Death Certificate is Important for Your Patients, Families and Community

Death certification is the final service to your patients. Many hospital systems and clinicians struggle to complete death certificates in a timely and accurate manner. This delay in death certification places undue stress on the families of the recently deceased. Cremations and religious customs are interrupted, financial affairs remain in limbo, and inaccurate death certificates can eliminate insurance benefits and negatively affect public health data. These delays in death certification reflect poorly on healthcare systems and physicians. Death Certification Company entirely assumes this important responsibility from clinicians and hospitals. Our group of board-certified forensic pathologists and pediatricians completes death certification from start to finish.

## PROBLEM:

Death certificates are important legal documents and serve the critical functions of providing documentation for legal/administrative purposes and vital statistics for health policy purposes. In addition to providing the decedent's family with a cause of death, it has critical administrative and epidemiological applications. Death certificates may be required to settle the decedent's estates, obtain insurance or other benefits, close bank accounts, and sell stocks and bonds. In many states, death certification is required prior to cremation or burial services. Mortality data compiled from death certificates is used to track disease trends, set public health policy, and allocate health and research funding. Death certificates may also be required to provide evidence in court cases. In order to satisfy these functions, it is important that death certificates be filled out completely, accurately, and promptly (1).

Despite their critical importance, numerous studies have demonstrated high rates of error in death certificates, especially in the cause of death section. For example, a 2017 study in Vermont found that 51% of death certificates had a major error that impacted the interpretation of the primary cause or contributing causes of death(2). In a 2010 study, deaths from cardiovascular disease in New York City were overestimated by 51% in adults ages 35-74. These errors have significant impacts on the public health data that underlie disease-specific mortality rates, track health disparities, and inform research and policy priorities(3). Inaccuracies in death certification are often attributed to a lack of formal training, clinical uncertainty, and an inflexible certification process. Many non-natural deaths are incorrectly certified as natural deaths by clinicians. These non-natural deaths, including hip fractures, drug toxicity, and blunt head trauma, should be referred to the local medical examiner or coroner. In our experience at Death Certification Company, approximately 5% of our 'natural' death certificates meet non-natural death criteria (accident, suicide, homicide) and are referred to the medical examiner/coroner for certification.

Many hospital systems and clinicians struggle to complete death certificates in a timely fashion. The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) collects and disseminates the nation's official vital statistics through the National Vital Statistics System (NVSS). NVSS refers to the inter-governmental sharing

of vital records data between NCHS and state vital registration offices. Through NVSS, 57 jurisdictions, which include the 50 states, New York City, the District of Columbia, and 5 U.S. territories, send birth and death data to NCHS. NCHS serves as the custodian and distributor of national vital statistics in the United States. NCHS has also recently begun using data from NVSS in near real-time to conduct public health surveillance. In 2015, only 83.9% of death certificate records were available to NVSS by 13 weeks following a death. Specifically for heart disease deaths, only 81.4% of death certificates were available by 13 weeks following death and 95.2% by 26 weeks(4). There are approximately 630,000 annual heart disease deaths in the United States; therefore, the potential issuance of approximately 117,000 heart disease death certificates may have been delayed longer than 13 weeks, and 30,200 delayed greater than 26 weeks.

Why do we struggle to complete accurate death certificates in a timely fashion? Medical death certification is a challenging, time-consuming, and daunting task for most healthcare practitioners and physicians. Clinicians are busy, and they justifiably prioritize the living. Death certificates often take a back seat to more important, and often overwhelming, clinical tasks. Most clinicians lack formal training in death certification, which makes the task even more daunting. For those who only sign the occasional death certificate, accessing and utilizing the state's electronic death certification software program can be onerous.

What are the costs of delayed, incomplete and inaccurate death certificates? Time, money, reputation, as well as phone calls, phone calls and more phone calls. Upset families and funeral homes can overwhelm clinicians and administrators with requests to complete or amend a death certificate. Funeral homes may contact physicians and their representatives repeatedly, particularly if a cremation is planned. Funeral homes or Department of Vital Records employees will request amendments if the death certificate is improperly completed. Amending a death certificate not only delays the issuance of the document, but it is also expensive and may cost families up to \$40 plus the cost of copies.

What is the price of this chaos? Lost clinical time, increased administrative support hours, declining hospital/physician reviews, and physician penalties. Clinicians and health care providers should prioritize their living patients, and fielding phone

calls about death certificates can be a significant distraction. Hospitals hire administrative staff to manage oversight of death certification and field these phone calls and requests. Hospital and clinician reviews by patients and families are important public information and may suffer from delayed or inaccurate death certification. Many states impose physician penalties for delayed certification. Penalties assessed in South Carolina are up to \$1000 per day for delayed death certification. In Illinois, it is a misdemeanor offense to delay death certification beyond 48 hours, and the physician may face disciplinary board action.

## SOLUTION:

Death certification can be performed remotely by board-certified forensic pathologists and pediatricians, who are experts in investigating adult and pediatric deaths. Death Certification Company currently contracts with 17 hospitals and has signed more than 9000 death certificates over the last three years. Our one-day turnaround time for a completed death certificate, once it has been posted to a state's electronic death certification system, is greater than 95%. Accuracy is very important to us. We routinely perform quality assurance reviews on approximately 5% of all completed death certificates. Our rejection rate of death certificates by the Bureau of Vital Records and funeral homes is below 0.1%. Once a death certificate is assigned to us, we take full responsibility for all family and funeral home phone calls, insurance and benefits inquiries, case referrals to the medical examiner/coroner, and autopsy result reviews. Death Certification Company employs board-certified forensic pathologists and pediatricians who value the importance of this final act of service to our patients.

## References:

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3. Morgan A, Andrew T, Guerra SMA, Luna V, Davies L, Rees JR. Provider reported challenges with completing death certificates: A focus group study demonstrating potential sources of error. *PLoS ONE* 17(5): e0268566.
4. Spencer M, Ahmad F. Timeliness of Death Certificate Data for Mortality Surveillance and Provisional Estimates. *NVSS Vital Statistics Rapid Release.* Report No. 001, December 2016.



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