

STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE



TO: New Hampshire Health Care Providers

FROM: Jennie V. Duval, M.D.
Chief Medical Examiner

RE: Death Certification

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Death certificates have always played an important public health role by providing timely and accurate data to epidemiologists and other public health officials. As the world confronts the COVID-19 pandemic, the critical role of death certificates has been brought to the forefront. The following information is intended to assist you in completing the death certificates for patients who succumb to COVID-19 or any other natural disease, whether the death occurred in a healthcare facility or at home.

As outlined in RSA 611-B:11, the Office of Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) has a duty to investigate all non-natural deaths (i.e. accidents, suicides, homicides) as well as sudden unexpected or unexplained deaths. **Expected deaths due to diagnosed or suspected COVID-19 or any other natural disease do not fall under OCME jurisdiction as long as there are no non-natural factors (e.g. trauma or drugs) that may have contributed to the death.** When OCME declines jurisdiction, the death certificate must be completed by the attending physician, APRN, or PA (RSA 5-C:64 III.). Electronic death certification is fast, easy and required by law. For more information or to register, contact NH Vital Records Administration (603-271-4651 or email nhvrin.ecod@sos.nh.gov).

On the death certificate, the cause of death information should represent the *best medical opinion* of the certifier. Absolute or 100% certainty as to the patient's cause of death is not required or expected. The expectation is that the certifier will determine the most likely cause of death based on the patient's past medical history, circumstances of death, and any other available relevant information (e.g. laboratory testing, travel history, known sick contacts).

Cause of death refers to the underlying disease (e.g. cancer, cardiovascular disease, chronic alcoholism) which initiates a sequence of events leading to death. Mechanism of death refers to the terminal pathophysiologic derangement (e.g. cardiac arrest, respiratory failure, aspiration) prior to death. It is the cause of death, not the mechanism of death, that is most informative and must be included on the death certificate.

The cause of death section of the death certificate is divided into two parts. Part I is the disease or sequence of up to four disease complications, connected by "due to" clauses, that directly caused the death. You may only use the top line (e.g. coronary artery atherosclerosis) or you may use up to four lines to enter the cause of death information (e.g. gastrointestinal hemorrhage due to ruptured esophageal varices due to cirrhosis of the liver due to chronic alcoholism). The

underlying disease should always be reported on the lowest line. Part II should be used for other significant comorbid conditions that contributed to death, but are independent of the sequence in Part I. Part II should not be used to list any/all medical conditions present at the time of death.

For deaths due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease caused by the 2019 novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2), the current preferred term “COVID-19” should be entered as the underlying cause of death in Part I of the death certificate. Consistency and uniformity in terminology will facilitate rapid and accurate collection of important public health data in New Hampshire. The cause of death should always be recorded as specifically as possible (e.g. acute respiratory distress syndrome due to pneumonia due to COVID-19). Other major co-morbidities (e.g. chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, hypertension) may be entered in Part II of the death certificate.

If a definitive diagnosis cannot be made at the time of death, it is acceptable to use “probable COVID-19,” but every effort should be made to confirm the diagnosis with laboratory testing. Postmortem nasopharyngeal swabs may be collected and submitted for testing if necessary. If COVID-19 test results are pending at the time of death, then “probable COVID-19 (pending test results)” is the preferred entry. The death certificate should be amended by the medical certifier when test results become available.

We are here to provide guidance and answer your questions regarding death certification during the COVID-19 pandemic or at any time. We are also happy to lecture on this topic to hospital staff, residents, medical students, or other interested groups. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me or any of my staff at (603) 271-1235. You may also contact your local Assistant Deputy Medical Examiner (ADME) through your county dispatcher. A list of dispatchers is available at <https://www.doj.nh.gov/medical-examiner/report-death.htm>. There is an on-call ADME and pathologist available 24/7.