

WHAT CAN THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR DO TO ENSURE SPEEDY CERTIFICATION OF DEATH CERTIFICATES?

1. The number one cause of costly delays to the families of the deceased occurs when a death certificate appears to have been a coroner's case, but was instead signed by a physician, physician assistant, or advanced practice professional nurse. Therefore, the funeral director needs to ascertain whether an external event was involved *anywhere* in the sequence of events which ultimately terminated in death before he/she presents the death certificate to the certifier for a signature. [Idaho Code §39-260.2](#) requires the funeral director to refer the following cases to the coroner and for the coroner to *certify* to the cause of death:
 - (a) When no physician, physician assistant or advanced practice professional nurse was in attendance during the last illness of the deceased;
 - (b) When the circumstances suggest that the death occurred as a result of other than natural causes; or
 - (c) When death is due to natural causes and the physician, physician assistant or advanced practice professional nurse who attended the deceased during the last illness or said person's designated associate who must be a physician, physician assistant or advanced practice professional nurse, is not available or is physically incapable of signing.

In order to help you identify questionable causes of death, we have prepared a sheet of causes and "buzz words" that should alert you to the likelihood that the death certificate may need to be certified by the coroner. See the sheet entitled "[Coroner Referrals](#)". Since the positioning of the causes on the death certificate (along with the other conditions listed) are very important in determining whether the coroner needs to certify, we suggest that you call us about any of these cases about which you are not absolutely certain.

*NOTE: Once a certificate that appears to be a coroner's case makes it to the state office, copies are not issued until the question of the rightful certifier is clarified. We cannot refer it to the coroner until we have checked with the physician to be sure there was no "natural" cause for the apparent external cause listed. Consequently, **this is a very time consuming process:***

1. *We have to write to the physician regarding the circumstance and cause of the questionable cause and --- wait for his reply ---*
2. *Then, if necessary (which in most cases it is), we send a Supplemental Information Form to the coroner and--- wait for his reply---*

Each time a reply arrives in this office, it takes at least one day to be processed and delivered to the appropriate desk. Depending on the current workload and deadlines of that clerk, it may take three or four days before it can be processed. Unfortunately, we receive a significant number of certificates that are filed with incomplete, inaccurate, or questionable information that must be followed up; this increases the length of the queue, and hence the time delay between responses.

All this time, the family has to wait for copies.

Also, two related problems are:

- If the coroner's certification is necessary, it is important that he/she be notified as soon as possible. Obviously, a coroner's investigation could be compromised if the body has already been embalmed. The earlier he/she is notified, the easier it will be to conduct the investigation.
 - Local issuance. If copies are issued locally and the death certificate must be changed later with the kind of change that would invalidate previous copies (such as being signed by a physician when it is a coroner's case), it is often difficult to retrieve those copies. Since the law stipulates that the coroner must sign certain cases, a death certificate certified by a physician would not be a truly valid record.
2. Item #24, (Time of Death) and Item #26 (Time Pronounced Dead): These items should be completed using the 24-hour clock (0000-2359). Midnight is entered as 0000; noon is 1200. *Please note that colons are **not** used with the 24-hour clock.* It is important to omit the colon; otherwise, it is unclear whether the certifier is using the 24-hour clock or failed to specify whether it was a.m. or p.m. on any entry that is before noon. (Example: If it reads 10:30, we do not know if this means a.m. or p.m. but if it reads 1030, we know it means 10:30 a.m. expressed using the 24-hour clock method.)

(NOTE: A death that occurs at 12 midnight belongs to the beginning of the new day. *It is important to pay extra attention to the correct date of death when death occurs at exactly midnight, as the family usually orders a tombstone right away and an error in the date of death could be very costly for them.*)

3. The death certificate is a legal document. **No changes should be made to the certifier's section** (except by the certifier) after the certifier has signed the record - as he/she would not be certifying to the changes.
4. The cause of death and the manner of death must agree. If not, check to see if the coroner needs to certify.
5. Errors/omissions caught before the certificate is filed with the Vital Statistics office are less complicated and less time-consuming to change. The more errors that can be caught at that time, the better for all concerned:
- Even minor errors such as adding a check mark in the autopsy field requires us to mark the record as "amended." This can raise questions in the minds of those who need copies of the certificates as to what was amended, why, and on what basis; in that respect, it detracts from the value of the record.
6. Your help is requested in double-checking the following items, which are the ones *most often missed or erroneous*, before filing the death certificate with the local registrar (the ones in bold face can result in delays in issuing copies):

#23 If the date of death is not known, it must be determined by approximation. An entry of "Found" or "Unknown" will not be accepted.

- #24** If the time of death is midnight, it can affect the date of death. An error in the date of death can be very costly to the family if they have already ordered a tombstone.
- #24 vs. #26** Make sure the date pronounced is the same as or later than the date of death, copies are not issued until the discrepancy is resolved. .
- #28** Check to make sure that #28a is completed. If #28a is checked "yes," item #28b must be completed also.
- #29** Tobacco item is often missed, although the copies are still issued.
- #30** Pregnancy status (females aged 10-54) is often missed, although the copies are still issued.
- #39c** Date signed left blank or wrong: If the wrong date signed is given and it conflicts with the date of death, copies are not issued until the discrepancy is resolved.
- #39a vs. #39d** Make sure the person whose name is typed in item #29e is the same person who signed in item #29b. [Note: An associate physician may sign in the absence of the attending physician only if “**such individual ¹ has access to the medical history of the case, ² views the deceased at or after death, and ³ death is due to natural causes.**” -- [Idaho Code §39-260.1.\(B\)](#)] (*Emphasis and numbering added.*)
- #32-38** Must be completed when the death is the result of other than natural causes. This item is not complete unless all four components are accounted for: 1) Address or location; 2) City/town or County, 3) State, and 4) Zip Code. *Often the Zip Code is not listed.*