Death Certification

Briefing Note

Healthcare Improvement Scotland leads new national review programme

What is changing?
The arrangements for death certification and registration have been extensively reviewed and in 2011 new laws were passed by the Scottish Parliament to:

- streamline the current process
- improve the accuracy of death certification, and
- provide improved public health information about causes of death in Scotland.

The Certification of Death (Scotland) Act 2011 introduces a number of changes to the current system. In particular, it introduces checks on the accuracy of Medical Certificates of Cause of Death (MCCDs) by setting up a new national review system. Under the new system, a sample of MCCDs will be selected for review. Sampling and review will be required regardless of whether burial or cremation is chosen.

At the moment, a burial can take place before the death is registered. The new system is due to start in April 2015 and from then all deaths must be registered before a body is buried or cremated.

Who is in charge of reviewing MCCDs?
The Certification of Death (Scotland) Act 2011 states that Healthcare Improvement Scotland will implement the death certification review programme and run the service, with the review of MCCDs carried out by experienced and trained doctors. The Senior Medical Reviewer will lead this work for Scotland and Dr George Fernie was appointed to this post in December 2013.

Healthcare Improvement Scotland will start reviewing MCCDs in April 2015.

More information about the current process for certifying and registering deaths can be found in a booklet called ‘When someone has died’ which can be found at www.nhsinform.co.uk/Bereavement/~/media/NHSinform/Bereavement%20zone/WhenSomeoneHasDiedшей

Deaths abroad
Healthcare Improvement Scotland will also manage the process of administering and authorising the burial and cremation of those who have died outside the UK and are returned (repatriated) for burial or cremation in Scotland. More information about what to do when somebody dies outside the UK is available from www.gov.uk/government/publications/copeing-with-death-abroad
Facts and figures

• Each year in Scotland there are about 55,000 deaths.

• Every death in Scotland must be certified by a doctor who completes a form called a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD). The MCCD records information about the death (including the cause of death). It also allows the death to be registered and the funeral to take place.

• All deaths must be registered.

• The person registering the death (called “the informant”) must take the MCCD to a Registrar. A death cannot be registered without the MCCD and once registration is completed, the Registrar will provide the “Certificate of Registration of Death” (the Death Certificate).

• The informant can be a family member, friend, partner, or other relevant person. Other arrangements can be made if there is no one available who knew the person who has died.

• Accurate certification of the cause of death is an important part of the medical record and of putting affairs in order.

• The Certificate of Registration of Death is the document that is generally required to confirm the death has taken place (for example by the funeral industry).

Meet the team

The death certification team: Programme Manager Caroline McGeachie, Administrative Officer Katherine Wilkinson, Senior Programme Manager Jane Byrne, Senior Medical Reviewer George Fernie, Associate Director for Scrutiny and Assurance Jan Warner and Project Officer Tammy Fenton. Not pictured: National Services Scotland IT Programme Manager Carol Lawrence and Senior Communications Officer Rob MacPhail
Senior Medical Reviewer Dr George Fernie has overall responsibility for leading Healthcare Improvement Scotland’s programme to review death certificates.

With a long and distinguished career in medicine, including a background in medical law and clinical forensic medicine, George brings a wealth of experience to the role. Since he was appointed in December, the Glasgow-born former medico-legal adviser has been focusing on preparing the groundwork for the new system which is due to launch in April 2015 and delivering a programme that is “proportionate, affordable and robust for public confidence.”

George explains: “Specifically, this programme aims to improve the manner in which certifying doctors complete certificates on the cause of death and to ensure that these are in order. We won’t be looking at the medical care that was given to the deceased – the aim is to be clear on what caused the death. As with other parts of Healthcare Improvement Scotland’s work, ultimately this is about improving quality and increasing public confidence in the medical profession.”

Cases to be reviewed will fall under one of two categories. For Level 1 reviews, the Medical Reviewer will scrutinise the certificate and speak to the certifying doctor. For Level 2 reviews, the Medical Reviewer will speak to the certifying doctor and check relevant medical records. It is anticipated that Level 1 reviews will take one day to complete, and Level 2 reviews will take three days.

An early priority for George was to meet the various stakeholders who will be affected by the new arrangements, including doctors, registrars and patient groups.

“One of the challenges arising from the new Act is that all deaths will now have to be registered before the body can be buried or cremated and this has the potential to impact particularly on certain faith groups. Muslim and Jewish communities, for example, have certain requirements about burying the body within a specific timescale following the death. I’ve met with representatives from those communities to hear their concerns, and I’m confident that we can complete our reviews within the necessary timescale and limit any potential delays to funerals.”

When George is joined by his team of Medical Reviewers in early 2015 he’ll be stressing to them that this programme is built on the principles of person-centredness: “I’m very conscious of the fact that, as a doctor, your relationship with patients doesn’t end with their death – there are still things you can do to help them and their family. Through this work we can provide greater detail on what caused someone’s death, and this may be of great benefit to the family they leave behind.”
### Key milestones

**January 2005**  
The Scottish Executive establishes the Burial and Cremation Review Group, chaired by Sheriff Robert Brodie, to review existing legislation on burials, cremations and death certification.

**April 2011**  
The Certification of Death (Scotland) Act 2011, which states that Healthcare Improvement Scotland will run the Death Certification Review programme, passed by the Scottish Parliament.

**September 2011**  
The Scottish Government National Implementation group established to oversee the implementation of the Act.

**December 2012**  
Healthcare Improvement Scotland Death Certification Programme Board set up to oversee delivery of the review programme.

**April 2013**  
Healthcare Improvement Scotland outline business case for review programme development approved.

**October 2013**  
Scottish Government announces intention to introduce electronic recording of death data in the NHS along with the new death certification review programme in April 2015.

**December 2013**  
Dr George Fernie appointed as Senior Medical Reviewer by Healthcare Improvement Scotland.

**March 2014**  
Chief Medical Officer letter sets out actions for NHS boards to ensure systems and operations are fully prepared for the forthcoming changes.

**August 2014**  
New paper Medical Certificate of Cause of Death form to be rolled out across Scotland.

**January 2015**  
Medical Reviewers and support staff to be appointed by Healthcare Improvement Scotland.

**April 2015**  
New system for reviewing death certificates scheduled to be launched and electronic recording of MCCD data in the NHS to be rolled out.

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For more information about Healthcare Improvement Scotland’s death certification review programme, please contact Programme Manager Caroline McGeachie – **phone** 0131 623 4751  
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More information about the programme is also available at  
[www.healthcareimprovementscotland.org/our_work/governance_and_assurance/death_certification.aspx](http://www.healthcareimprovementscotland.org/our_work/governance_and_assurance/death_certification.aspx)