

## Issuing cause of death certificates for apparent natural causes deaths

From time to time you may be approached by police or a family member to issue a cause of death certificate (Form 9) for a patient who appears to have died from natural causes.

This fact sheet addresses common concerns about medical practitioners' ability to issue death certificates in these circumstances.

It also explains when you should not issue a death certificate because the death may be reportable to the coroner.

### ***What am I entitled to know about how the person died?***

You can and should ask police for information about the circumstances in which the person died or their body was found.

### ***Can I review the patient records first?***

You can and should ask police for a reasonable period of time to review the person's records.

It may also be helpful for you to speak to other medical practitioners involved in the person's care. Some examples include other general practitioners, specialists or treating hospital doctors. You may also ask to see records made by them.

You have **two working days** within which to decide whether you can issue a death certificate.

Timely issuing of death certificates significantly reduces family distress and unnecessary disruption to funeral arrangements.

### ***But I haven't seen the person recently?***

There is **no longer** any requirement for you to have seen the person within a certain timeframe (e.g. three months) to be able to issue a death certificate.

### ***But I haven't examined the person's body?***

There is **no** requirement for you to have viewed or examined the person's body before you issue a death certificate.

### ***I'm certain it was a natural causes death, but I don't know the exact cause of death?***

In order to complete the death certificate you are required by law to form an opinion as to the **probable** cause of death, taking into account what you know about the person's medical history and the circumstances of their death.

It may help to discuss your thinking about the probable cause of death with a colleague.

You can also discuss the death with a Forensic Medicine Officer (FMO) from the Department of Health Clinical Forensic Medicine Unit. FMOs are doctors who assist the coroner by providing clinical advice about reportable deaths. They can help you by acting as a clinical 'sounding board' for your thinking about probable cause of death and how to write up the death certificate.

*Contact: (07) 3405 5755 (business hours, ask for FMO on coronial duties)  
131 444 (after hours, ask for on-call FMO)*

### ***But the person wasn't my patient?***

There is **no** requirement for you to have treated the person.

You can issue the death certificate provided you have had an opportunity to consider information about the person's medical history, for example, by reviewing patient records or speaking to another doctor involved in the person's care and you can form an opinion as to the probable cause of death.

***I want to know the family is happy for me to issue a certificate***

If you feel comfortable issuing a death certificate, you can and should contact the person's family to explain what you consider the probable cause of death to be and why. Families are generally very appreciative of this contact and it gives you an opportunity to be alerted to any issues of concern that might better be referred to the coroner.

***I want to know the coroner is happy for me to issue a certificate***

An apparent natural causes death is reportable to the coroner **only** if a probable cause of death is genuinely not known.

The Coronial Registrar, Office of the State Coroner, Brisbane is available to discuss the death with you and advise whether it is appropriate for you to issue a death certificate.

*Contact: Coronial Registrar  
(07) 3247 4606 (business hours)  
On-call coroner  
(07) 3247 3372 (after hours)*

***What if the person recently had surgery?***

Just because the person has had surgery within four weeks of the death does not, of itself, make the death reportable to the coroner. The death is reportable **only** if you consider the surgery has caused or contributed significantly to or hastened the person's death ('health care related death')

Contact the Coronial Registrar for advice if you think the death could be health care related.

***What if the person recently had a fall?***

If you consider a fall-related injury (e.g. fractured neck of femur or subdural haematoma) has caused or contributed significantly to or hastened the death, the death must be reported to the coroner.

Contact the Coronial Registrar for advice about whether the death needs to be reported and if so, how to report it.

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**Please note: This publication was produced prior to the current government.**

***When shouldn't I issue a death certificate?***

You should **not** issue a death certificate if you have any concern the person may have taken their own life or has died a violent or otherwise unnatural or suspicious death (e.g. accidental drug overdose, choking, traumatic injury) or you are aware the family has concerns about the health care provided to the person before they died.

In these circumstances, you should explain your concerns to police, who will refer the death to the coroner.

Any death of a patient with a disability who lived in supported residential accommodation or a patient with a mental illness who was receiving involuntary treatment at the time of their death is also reportable to the coroner.

Contact the Coronial Registrar, Office of the State Coroner for advice about how to report these deaths.

**For further information:**

Office of the State Coroner Queensland:  
[www.courts.qld.gov.au/courts/coroners-court](http://www.courts.qld.gov.au/courts/coroners-court)

*Births Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 2003 (Qld), section 30*  
[www.legislation.qld.gov.au/LEGISLTN/CURRENT/B/BirthsDMA03.pdf](http://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/LEGISLTN/CURRENT/B/BirthsDMA03.pdf)

***For guidance if you have never completed a cause of death certificate before:***

[www.racgp.org.au/afp/2011/june/how-to-complete-a-death-certificate/](http://www.racgp.org.au/afp/2011/june/how-to-complete-a-death-certificate/)

[www.racgp.org.au/download/documents/AFP/2011/June/201106bird.pdf](http://www.racgp.org.au/download/documents/AFP/2011/June/201106bird.pdf)

[www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/48f07ae57b57ef82ca2570270006d8f6/da94ec7234fa8023ca25750b000e92b0!OpenDocument](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/48f07ae57b57ef82ca2570270006d8f6/da94ec7234fa8023ca25750b000e92b0!OpenDocument)

[www.uq.edu.au/hishub/handbook](http://www.uq.edu.au/hishub/handbook) (*Handbook for doctors on death certification*)

*This fact sheet has been prepared in partnership with the Queensland Police Service and the Queensland Department of Health Clinical Forensic Medicine Unit and Forensic and Scientific Services.*