



Maricopa County

Department of Public Health and
Office of the Medical Examiner

Dept. of Public Health
4041 N. Central Avenue, Ste
1400, 14th Floor
Phoenix, AZ 85012
Office (602)506-6609

Forensic Science Center
701 West Jefferson
Phoenix, AZ 85007
Office (602)506-6609

November 19, 2010

Dear Colleague:

As you know, on January 1, 2010, Arizona adopted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) 2003 Standard Death Certificate and we began using new documents for the certification of causes of death (COD). The new certificate requires we provide information regarding the decedent's use of tobacco, pregnancy history and available autopsy findings. The new information along with the certification of causes of death are submitted remotely through a secure and HIPPA compliant electronic fax system.

We are following up with you regarding these changes so you are better able to perform medical certification and comply with applicable requirements.

I. New update

Current Arizona law defines medical certifiers as allopathic and osteopathic physicians (MD and DO) and certified nurse practitioners. However, recent legislation has expanded the definition of medical certifier to include naturopathic physicians (NMD and ND) as of July 29, 2010 and physician assistants as of December 31, 2010.

I. New initiative

Recent changes to both the death certificate standard and the statute related to medical certification have created a need to provide outreach and education to our medical professional partners. To improve the quality of the information collected from health care practitioners and make the process of certification easier for you, we are creating training tools. We will provide you with guidance on specifying causes of death, while following protocols and using your best clinical opinion at the time.

Criteria for proper specification of causes of death have been established both federally and internationally, and are a part of the statutes and regulations of the State of Arizona. These criteria allow for a comparison of our community with other parts of the nation, give us information for proper referral of Medical Examiner cases (see attachment 1), and provide the County and the State with data to evaluate the epidemiology of illness and health of the community.

Dept. of Public Health
4041 N. Central Avenue, Ste
1400, 14th Floor
Phoenix, AZ 85012
Office (602)506-6609

Forensic Science Center
701 West Jefferson
Phoenix, AZ 85007
Office (602)506-3322

In addition, public and private institutions use these statistics to justify requests for research funding. Therefore, the more accurate the statistics are, the more opportunities there are available to improve community health.

The cornerstone of this process is the health care practitioner who certifies the cause of death in the certificate. When the cause of death is not clearly specified in the death certificate, it is coded as "ill-defined" by nosologists. In the case of our own jurisdiction, for example, diabetes is a serious disease among major segments of our population. If the underlying cause of death is not classified as diabetes because the certifier only documented "end stage renal disease", that death will not be attributed to diabetes. When we try to solicit prevention and/or research funds for diabetes, the data will show a lower incidence rate in our community. This may negatively impact assistance received, hurting the overall health of our community.

Thus, the quality, completeness and accuracy of the death certificate are of paramount importance, not only to the family who should have a faithful record of the death, but also to the entire public health and medical systems.

The elements of this new initiative are the following:

1. Development of death certificate specialists at the Maricopa County Department of Public Health Office of Vital Registration who are trained in the standards of ICD10 and state and federal requirements in relation to causes of death. They can be of assistance in assuring compliance when certifying deaths. This phase should be completed in the fall/winter of 2010.
2. Development of a curriculum for the instruction of health care providers who certify causes of death for use in hospitals, hospices, nursing homes, medical groups, and professional schools. To be complete by the fall of 2010.
3. The Arizona Department of Health Services anticipates developing an online training course for health care providers who certify causes of death to be rolled out in 2011.

Attached is CDC/NCHS guidance that can assist you in properly providing the chain of events that led to the death on the death certificate. Also attached is a one page summary of the types of deaths that should be referred to the Medical Examiner and the process to follow in those cases.

Please note the importance of including the interval between onset of symptoms and death next to each cause. Remember, a cause of death is your best medical

Dept. of Public Health
4041 N. Central Avenue, Ste
1400, 14th Floor
Phoenix, AZ 85012
Office (602)506-6609

Forensic Science Center
701 West Jefferson
Phoenix, AZ 85007
Office (602)506-3322

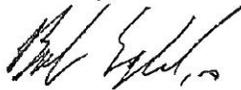
opinion. It should be the one your clinical opinion favors given the information available to you at the moment you sign the certificate. Modifiers like “probable” and “approximate” are perfectly acceptable. If additional information is brought to your attention after the initial medical certification that could change the cause of death, a supplementary certificate of cause of death may be submitted.

We have also posted all of the important forms and instructions on our website at www.WeArePublicHealth.org. Click on the “Birth & Death Certificates” link on the top left of our homepage, then click on “Medical Practitioner Info”. There are links under this heading to the guidance and courses for cause of death certification from ADHS, other states, CDC/NCHS, and the National Association of Public Health Statistics and Information Systems (NAPHSIS). You may also click on **medicalcertifier.com**, **medical certifier.org**, **codinfo.org**, or **codhelp.com**.

For questions, comments or concerns regarding the medical certification of a Maricopa County vital event during regular business hours, please feel free to call the MCDPH Office of Vital Registration Staff at 602-372-0535. After hours and weekends, you may call 602-525-6968. You may ask to speak to any of the following supervisors who can assist you: Paula Bonell, Training Supervisor, Elizabeth Rabusa, Quality Assurance Supervisor, Amy Radeka, Death Registration/VSIMS Issuance Supervisor, or Michele Castaneda-Martinez, Program Manager.

We thank you for your efforts in helping us develop an improved death registration process in the State of Arizona. Your dedication and willingness to provide your medical expertise will benefit the overall health of our community for years to come.

Sincerely,



Bob England, MD, MPH
Director
Maricopa County Dept of Public Health



Mark A. Fischione, MD
Chief Medical Examiner
Maricopa County