

Completing the Revised Death Certificate

By

John Kraemer, PA, F-ABMDI
Director, Forensic Operations
Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner

The Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner (IOSME) has received many questions regarding completion of the revised death certificate. This article addresses these common issues.

Funeral directors should complete sections 1 through 23, only. If you are not sure the information you have is accurate, contact the IOSME, your county medical examiner, or the decedent's primary care physician to obtain or verify the information. If you cannot obtain accurate information, leave the section blank. Making sure your part of the death certificate is complete and accurate prior to sending it to the certifier will assure its timely return for filing and will eliminate the need of having to generate a second death certificate for completion.

Only the certifier may complete sections 24 through 49. The most common question the IOSME has received is "who can pronounce death" (sections 24-30). Pronouncement of death and certification of death are two separate entities. The person pronouncing death may be different than the person who will certify the death. The most common reason vital records has returned the new death certificate is because the person listed as the pronouncer of death does not meet the legal requirements necessary to pronounce death.

Per Iowa Code 702.8, physicians, physician assistants, registered nurses and licensed practical nurses are the only individuals who can **pronounce** death. Any individuals not specified in Iowa Code 702.8 should not be listed as the pronouncer. There are times when pronouncement of death is done by emergency medical service (EMS) providers. In these circumstances, death is being pronounced through on-line medical control or through their respective service's EMS protocols. On-line medical direction means the EMS provider is in direct contact with a physician via phone or radio, who ultimately makes the decision to pronounce death. In cases where EMS is involved with the pronouncement, the physician with whom the EMS crews were in contact through on-line medical direction or the physician who is that respective EMS service's medical director should be listed as the pronouncer. Sections 26-28 (signature of person pronouncing death, title and license number) should be completed, but may be left blank after a reasonable effort to obtain this information has been made.

Certification of death (Iowa Code 144.28) can be completed by the decedent's primary physician (if death was due to *natural* causes) or by a physician medical examiner (if the death was due to unnatural causes). Beginning July 1, 2011, advanced registered nurse practitioners (ARNPs) and physician assistants (PAs) can certify only those deaths that are due to natural causes, and the decedent must also have been their patient.

If you have any questions regarding the completion of the Iowa death certificate, please do not hesitate to contact the IOSME (515-725-1400), the state Bureau of Vital Statistics (515-281-4944) or your county recorder.