

# Issuing cause of death certificates for apparent natural causes deaths

## A guide for Queensland medical practitioners

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 health professionals' ability to issue a death certificate in these circumstances. It also explains when a death certificate should not be issued because the death is 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.

### I haven't seen the person recently

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

### 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, considering 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, Forensic Medicine Queensland. 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 the probable cause of death and how to write up the death certificate.

**Contact: Forensic Medicine Queensland** (07) 3722 1300 (business hours – ask for the FMO on coronial duties)

### 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 if 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, Coroners Court of Queensland is available during business hours to discuss the death with you and advise whether it is appropriate for you to issue a death certificate.

**Contact: Coronial Registrar** (07) 3738 7050 (business hours)

**Contact: On-call coroner** (07) 3738 7166 (after hours)

## What if the person recently had surgery?

Just because the person had surgery within four weeks of the death does not 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 or 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.

## 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, 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, had a mental illness who was receiving involuntary treatment at the time of their death, or was a child in care or under guardianship of the State, is also reportable to the coroner.

You can contact the Coronial Registrar for advice about how to report these deaths.

## For guidance completing a cause of death certificate

More information about how to complete a cause of death is available for GPs and other clinicians on HealthPathways. To find out if HealthPathways is active in your health area, contact your local Primary Health Network (PHN). For details visit - <https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/phn/your-local-phn>.

## Further information

**Coroners Court of Queensland** – [Information for health professionals \(courts.qld.gov.au\)](https://www.courts.qld.gov.au/health-professionals)

**The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP)** 'How to complete a death certificate – A guide for GP's article - <https://www.racgp.org.au/getattachment/42ea840e-ce92-4ee7-8ae6-dd615a4acd3d/How-to-complete-a-death-certificate.aspx>

**Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 2003** section 30 - 'Cause of death certificate' – <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2003-031>

## Contact details

This guide has been prepared by the Coroners Court of Queensland in partnership with the Queensland Police Service and the Department of Health, Forensic Medicine Queensland.

If you have any enquiries or feedback about this guide, please email the Coroners Court: [CoronersCourt@justice.qld.gov.au](mailto:CoronersCourt@justice.qld.gov.au).

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