

# ISSUE OF DEATH CERTIFICATE- WHAT A DENTIST SHOULD KNOW

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## ABSTRACT

Death means the permanent disappearance of all evidence of life at any time after live-birth has taken place. Cause of Death Certification is the official recording of a person's death. It records the cause of death of a person as stated by a doctor or another responsible health worker. The death certificate is a standard proforma (form No. 4), devised by world Health Organization (WHO) and is implemented by Govt of India. This form is devised for the sake of uniformity and comparability of data. Filling up of the form requires utmost care and knowledge of morbid events leading to the death of a person. Revised dentist code of ethics allows dentist to issue death certificate. The awareness among dentists regarding this is less and more focus should be done to increase awareness. This article aims to increase the awareness among dentists regarding death certification.

**Keywords:** Death; Certification; dentist code of ethics; proforma; awareness.

## INTRODUCTION

Birth and Death are the two most important events in the life of any individual as the person's existence starts at the moment of birth and ceases at the moment of death. A person has legal existence between their corded timings of birth and death<sup>1</sup>. The physician's concept of death is total stoppage of circulation of blood with consequent cessation of vital functions. All these definitions require revision from cessation to permanent cessation of respiration and circulation. Therefore a more appropriate definition would be "death is a permanent and irreversible cessation of functions of three interlinked vital systems of body namely the nervous, circulatory and respiratory systems, the so called tripod of life"<sup>2</sup>.

In India, with the passing of the Act - Registration of Births and Deaths Act - in 1969, registration of these events is mandatory. Registrar General of India is the highest official who compiles the information about deaths and births received from Registrars & Sub-registrars of Births and Deaths at district level, Municipal Corporations and Municipalities of towns and Cantonment Boards of Military Cantonments.

### Examination for somatic death

Auscultate for heart sounds (2min). Auscultate for respiratory sounds (3min). Palpate carotid pulse. Occulo-cephalic test, moving head on both sides. Vestibulo-ocular test using cold water. Apnoea test, Magnus test : placing a ligature round the base of a finger. Diaphanous test : looking through the web of the fingers at a bright light. ECG tracing is confirmatory for death.

### Role of medical officer

When confronted with 'death' of a person, the medical officer has two tasks at hand. The first is to diagnose the occurrence of death and declare the person dead. The second is to decide the cause of death and certify the same. Having decided that the person is dead, he proceeds to fill up "Death Report" in the capacity of informant. Both the formats of death report viz Legal Information and Statistical Information, are to be filled up for each death. The second task at hand i.e. issuing Medical Certificate

of Cause of Death, is done immediately after deciding the person is dead, by the same medical officer who has declared the person dead, provided the medical officer is absolutely certain of the cause of death and if it is a natural death. Deaths due to old age and deaths due to any naturally occurring disease or its complication are Natural Deaths. Correct knowledge of the cause of death is essential as future course of action is different if the death is other than natural or cause of death is not known/doubtful. If the death is not clearly of natural category i.e. other than natural or cause not known/doubtful, the medical officer having carried out first task i.e. declaration of death, informs the police of occurrence of the death for further course of action. He will not issue a medical certificate of cause of death. Since the bottom portion of the medical certificate of cause of death is required to be produced by the relatives at the cremation ground/the municipality office giving permission for cremation, non-issuance of the same will automatically ensure that the body can not be cremated.

Having taken over the custody of the dead body, the investigating police officer proceeds with inquest and the cause of death is decided after the medico-legal postmortem is carried out as part of the inquest. This system ensures that the body is not disposed off without necessary investigations by the police into the cause and circumstances of death, when the death is due to other than natural causes.

Certain other points to be kept in mind by the medical officer concerning the issuance of medical certificate of cause of death, are:-

- (a) He should not delay, for any reason, issuing the medical certificate of cause of death, once he is sure of the cause of death.
- (b) He can not charge any fees for issuing this certificate.
- © He should not withhold issuance of medical certificate of cause of death even if his dues have not been cleared by the relatives.
- (d) No medical officer should sign medical certifi-

cate of cause of death in advance (i.e. before the individual has died) or without viewing and examining the dead body personally.

Clause 3.10 of revised dentist code of ethics of 2014 allows dentist to issue death certificate. Most dentists are not aware of it. Dentist can certify death of patients under their treatment.

### HOW TO FILL THE FORM

**Name of the deceased:** to be given in full. Do not use the initials. If the deceased is an infant, not yet named, at the time of death, write son of (S/O) or daughter of (D/O), followed by the names of mother and father.

**Age:** If the deceased is over one year of age, give age in complete years. If the deceased was below one year of age, give age in months and if below one month of age, in completed number of days, and if below one day, in hours.

**Cause of death:** this part of the form should always be completed by the attending physician personally. The actual certificate is divided in two parts viz. part-I and part-II.

Part-I. It Deals with the immediate cause and the underlying cause of death. The immediate cause or the terminal event is entered here. Part-II. It Deals with other significant condition or disease contributed to the process of death but did not lead to it.

#### Part-I

Only one cause is to be entered in each line. Line-a: Immediate cause of death is entered here, like disease/abnormality/injury/poisoning etc. The immediate cause is defined as the immediate or terminal event leading to death. Mode of death such as respiratory failure, cardiac failure etc is not an appropriate entry. Line-b: Next considers whether the immediate cause is a complication of delayed result of some other cause. If so, enter the antecedent cause in part-1 line- b. The antecedent causes refer to the pathological process or injury responsible for death. Thus it is a disease or injury that has initiated the train of morbid events leading directly to death or it

is the circumstances of the accident or violence that produced the fatal injury<sup>3</sup>. Line-c: Sometimes there will be three stages in the course of events leading to death. If so, line-c will be completed.

#### Part-II

Other significant conditions contributing to death, but not related to disease condition causing it. Onset: complete the column for interval between onset and death whenever possible, even if very approximate e.g. from birth, or several years etc.

The sequence of events to be followed, in death certification are<sup>4</sup>.

The cause of death is known

- 7.1. Death of a person- the attending physician/registered medical practitioner issues the death certificate, in prescribed proforma. It is as per provision made in the Registration of Birth and Death 1969 (18 of 1969).<sup>5</sup>
  - 7.2. The certificate is send to Registrar of Birth and Death. (As per above Act)
  - 7.3. Registrar or his representative certifies the extract given in the certificate.
  - 7.4. This certified death certificate is admissible as evidence for the purpose of proving birth/death. (Section 76, of Indian Evidence Act 1872 (1 of 1872).
- B) The cause of death is not known/ uncertain.
- 7.5. The last attending doctor does not issue the death certificate.
    - 7.5.1. The case is informed to the police.
    - 7.5.2. The body is kept in safe custody and handed over to the police for autopsy.
    - 7.5.3. After autopsy the facts of death is communicated to local registrar.
    - 7.5.4. Death certificate is issued by registrar of Birth and Death.

## CONCLUSION

Considering the importance of correct certification of medical cause of death and death registration, the foregoing account of the different aspects of the same, has tried to clarify the difficulties and doubts encountered by the registered medical practitioner while certifying death. The awareness among dentists regarding the issue of death certificate is less and more focus should be done to increase awareness. This article aims to increase the awareness among dentists regarding death certification.

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FIGURE 1 – FORM 4

**FORM -4**  
**MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF CAUSE OF DEATH**  
 (Hospital in-patients. Not to be used for still-births)  
 To be sent to Registrar along with Form No.2 (Death Report)

Name of the Hospital \_\_\_\_\_  
 I hereby certify that the person whose particulars are given below died in the Hospital in Ward \_\_\_\_\_  
 on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_ A.M./P.M. \_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of the Deceased \_\_\_\_\_ for use of  
 Statistical  
 Office

Sex	Age at Death If one year or more, age in years	If less than one year, age in Months	If less than one month, age in Days	If less than one day, age in Hours
1. Male				
2. Female				

CAUSE OF DEATH	Interval between onset & Death approx
I. Immediate cause State the disease, injury or complication, which caused death, not the mode of dying such as heart failure, asthma, etc.	(a) due to (or as a consequence of)
Antecedent cause Morbid conditions, if any giving rise to the above Cause, stating underlying conditions last.	(b) due to (or as a consequence of)
II Other significant conditions contributing to the death but not related to the diseases or conditions causing it.	(c)

Manner of Death : 1. Natural 2. Accident 3. Suicide 4. Homicide 5. Pending investigation How did the injury occur \_\_\_\_\_

If deceased was a female, was pregnancy the death associated with \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Yes 2. No.  
 If yes, was there a delivery ? \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Yes 2. No.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Name and signature of the Medical Attendant certifying the cause of death