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IOWA BOARD OF MEDICINE
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August 13, 2009

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Physicians reminded of responsibilities for completing Iowa death certificates

DES MOINES, IA -- The Iowa Board of Medicine is working with the Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner to heighten Iowa physicians' awareness of their responsibilities to complete death certificates in a timely manner.

A brochure prepared by the Medical Examiner's Office and the Iowa Department of Public Health's Bureau of Health Statistics, is posted on the Board's Website (www.medicalboard.iowa.gov) and is being distributed to physicians when they receive their Iowa license or renewal it.

The Medical Examiner's Office is concerned that the attending physician at a person's death may not be aware that state law requires the death certificate to be completed within 72 hours after receipt of the certificate from the funeral director. The prompt completion of the certificate is required so that families can close out the estate of the deceased person and begin to settle business and personal affairs.

The brochure answers many frequently asked questions about death certificates and includes a Web link to the Physician's Handbook on Medical Certification of Death, a publication of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Ga.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITY AS A PHYSICIAN IN IOWA REGARDING COMPLETION OF DEATH CERTIFICATES.

What the Iowa Code specifies:

144.28 MEDICAL CERTIFICATION

1. The medical certification shall be completed and signed by the physician in charge of the patient's care for the illness or condition which resulted in death within seventy-two hours after receipt of the death certificate from the funeral director or individual who initially assumes custody of the body, except when inquiry is required by the county medical examiner. If upon inquiry into the death, the county medical examiner determines that a preexisting natural disease or condition was the likely cause of death and that the death does not affect the public interest as described in section 331.802, subsection 3, the county medical examiner may elect to defer to the physician in charge of the patient's preexisting condition the certification of the cause of death. When inquiry is required by the county medical examiner, the medical examiner shall investigate the cause of death, and shall complete and sign the medical certification within seventy-two hours after determination of the cause of death.
2. The person completing the medical certification of cause of death shall attest to its accuracy either by signature or by an electronic process approved by rule.

Frequently asked questions:

Who is responsible for signing the death certificate?

If a decedent has a physician who has provided treatment for the disease which ultimately resulted in their death, then it is the responsibility of that physician to sign the death certificate in all cases where the manner of death is natural.

Primary care physicians whose patients have died at home may be contacted by the medical examiner and asked to complete the death certificate for their patient. If the investigation has indicated that the manner of death may be other than natural, i.e. homicide, accident, suicide or undetermined, then only a Medical Examiner may complete and sign the death certificate.

How quickly must the death certificate be completed?

If the treating physician is responsible for completing the death certificate, then by law it must be done within **72 hours after receipt of the certificate** from the funeral director.

Why is it important that death certificates be completed in a timely fashion?

Prompt completion of the death certificate is extremely important to the family. They must have copies of the death certificate to close out the estate of the decedent

and settle many business and personal affairs. Copies of the death certificate are needed in order to:

- Close bank accounts.
- Obtain Social Security benefits for surviving children.
- Obtain access to safe deposit boxes.
- Perform simple actions such as shutting off utilities at the residence.

Most insurance companies require a completed death certificate before paying life and accident insurance claims.

Surviving family members may not have the necessary funds to pay for funeral and burial arrangements and are waiting for distribution of benefits or payout from insurance claims in order to pay those bills.

Unnecessary delays in receiving the death certificate cause hardships for the family at times when they are already emotionally distraught.

Why are County and State Medical Examiners allowed additional time to complete the certification?

Often the County or State Medical Examiner must rule out non-natural deaths and must use the autopsy, toxicology or investigation results in order to complete the certification.

How can Iowa physicians help alleviate delays and assist the family members of their patients?

If one of your patients dies, be watching for the death certificate when it is brought to you for your completion. Please alert your staff so that they are aware of the law regarding the time required for the completion of death certificates so they can assist in the process. In addition, please try to make yourself available to the ME Investigator if they call to obtain a cause of death on a decedent who is going to be cremated.

What if I don't know how to complete the cause and manner of death?

You can download the *Physicians' handbook on Medical Certification of Death* from the CDC website at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/misc/hb_cod.pdf.

You can also call the Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner at 515-725-1400 and ask for assistance or Iowa Vital Records at 515-281-4945.

Provided by

Bureau of Health Statistics

and

The Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner



Iowa Department of Public Health
Promoting and Protecting the Health of Iowans

