

From the Chief Medical Officer
Dr Michael McBride



Department of
**Health, Social Services
and Public Safety**

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AN ROINN

**Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta
agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí**

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NIMDTA

Police Service for Northern Ireland
Coroners Service for Northern Ireland
Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority
National Association of Funeral Directors for distribution to
Funeral Directors

Dear Colleagues

VERIFYING AND RECORDING LIFE EXTINCT BY APPROPRIATE PROFESSIONALS

Background

When a person dies, a number of steps need to be completed to allow legal registration of the death and for a funeral to take place. These steps are:

1. **Verifying life extinct.** This first step has no formal legal term and is referred to in a number of ways including Recognition of Life Extinct (ROLE), verification of death, pronouncing death, confirming death.
2. **Certifying the medical cause of death or referral to the Coroner.** A doctor who had treated the patient in the last 28 days for a natural illness that caused their death may issue a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD). If a doctor cannot complete an MCCD, either because the cause of death was not natural or because

they were not treated in the final 28 days of life, then the death must be referred to the Coroner.

3. **Registering the Death.** The family (or certain other people) will provide the person's details to the local registrar, with either the MCCD or the Coroners form giving the cause of death.
4. **Obtaining a burial or cremation order.** The registrar or coroner can issue a burial or cremation order. Cremation requires the completion of special forms by doctors in addition to the MCCD or coroners forms.

This circular focuses on the first step in this process, verification of life extinct.

Verification of life extinct has traditionally been carried out by doctors, but it can be carried out by any doctor, nurse or ambulance clinician who has had appropriate training. If an appropriately trained health professional is present at the time of death they should verify life extinct.

The Department's response to the recommendations contained in Shipman Inquiry Reports 3, 4 & 5 "Improving Patient Safety: Building Public Confidence", included a commitment to issue guidance on appropriate verification and recording of the fact of death. This guidance has been drafted by a small multiprofessional group with representation from primary care, secondary care, the ambulance service and the Coroners service and is attached to this circular. Trusts may find it a useful basis for developing protocols. Trusts are asked to undertake the following:

Actions

1. Develop or update an organisational policy in relation to deaths of patients/ clients.
2. Clarify protocols regarding verification life extinct to include provision for doctors, nurses and ambulance clinicians to undertake this role. The protocols should include:
 - Examination and recording of verification of life extinct.
 - How this information is passed to a doctor qualified to complete a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD) or the Coroner.
 - Training provided in verifying and recording life extinct, including legal issues, exemptions to normal verification of life extinct and appropriate onward referral.
 - Agreement with Trust clinicians and with local GPs, GP out-of-hours services and Police Forensic Medical Officers about verification of life extinct in different situations.
3. Trusts should ensure that training and protocols are in place by 1st August 2008 in hospitals and 1st February 2009 in community settings.

Yours sincerely



Dr Michael McBride
Chief Medical Officer



Mr Martin Bradley
Chief Nursing Officer