

# Revisions to the Iowa Death Certificate

## *An Interview with Dennis Klein, MD, IOSME*

### **Who decided to revise the Iowa Death Certificate, and why?**

The Bureau of Vital Statistics, an organization within the Iowa Department of Public Health, maintains records on births, marriages and deaths. The Bureau also is responsible for drafting and adopting revisions to the Iowa Death Certificate. Iowa traditionally adopts changes to the Iowa Death Certificate that reflect recommendations of the National Center for Health Statistics (part of the CDC) in the US Standard Certificate of Death. The Iowa Bureau of Vital Statistics also reviews and adopts changes applicable to items specific to Iowa. Historically, major revisions occur about every 10 years. The revision that occurred in January, 2011 essentially followed this typical time interval. The revision in July, 2011 was atypical and reflected changes in items specific to Iowa.

### **What general topics to the revisions cover?**

The revision in January, 2011 included:

- Boxes 24-30 dealing with date and time of pronouncement of death, name, title and license number of the person pronouncing death and “actual or presumed” date and time of death.
- Boxes 31a and 31b dealing with medical examiner contacted and, if contacted, an ME case number (either ME-1 number or autopsy number).
- Box 35 dealing with tobacco use and contribution to death.
- Box 43 dealing with transportation cases, indicating driver, passenger or pedestrian.

### **What problems have arisen with the revised death certificate?**

Confusion about what information the certificate is looking for and difficulty in acquiring the new information are the two biggest problems caused by the recent revisions.

Documenting the person who pronounced death is new, and this is information we as certifiers of death have not had to deal with in the past. In many cases, this information is difficult to find or not present in the records available to the medical examiner. It requires time, phone calls and searching in the medical records.

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### *Dr. Klein interview, continued*

“Actual” date and “actual” time (boxes 29 and 30) are terms and concepts that have little meaning to the medical examiner outside a controlled medical setting. Unless a medical person is present at the time of death, there is no reliable finding or test to determine the “actual” time of death, only estimates. Therefore, we have adopted the practice of using the pronounced time of death on official documents such as the death certificate. When the death occurs outside of a medical institution, using the prefix “pronounced” or “found” helps to clarify confusion when completing these sections.

### **Who can legally declare death in Iowa? Is this a change?**

It is important when completing death certificates to understand the difference between “pronouncing” death and “certifying” the death. Pronouncement of death is the medical process of determining that a person is, in fact, dead. In Iowa, any physician with an MD or DO degree and holding a valid medical license may pronounce death. Licensed Physician Assistants, Registered Nurses, Nurse Practitioners and Licensed Practical Nurses may pronounce death if the death was anticipated and occurred in a hospital, hospice or nursing care facility. EMS providers can pronounce death at a scene under the direction of their medical directors.

Certifying the death is the process of determining the cause and manner of death, and completing and signing the medical portion of the death certificate.

1. Natural deaths may be certified by any licensed physician (MD or DO).
2. An Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner or Physician Assistant may certify deaths that are natural in manner, and occur in patients under their care.
3. A medical examiner must certify any death which occurs due to a manner that is not natural.

### **What is the difference between manner of death and cause of death?**

**Cause of death** is the medical finding or findings responsible for the death. Although mechanisms can appear as part of the cause of death statement, it is necessary to always conclude with the underlying etiology for the death.

**Manner of death** is the classification of the death, into one of the designations natural, suicide, homicide, accident or undetermined.

## **Are there plans for further revisions to the Iowa Death Certificate?**

As soon as the National Center for Health Statistics publishes the latest version of the US Standard Certificate of Death, the committee begins work on planning the next revision. As Iowa typically follows the US Standard Certificate, we should anticipate that there will be future revisions to Iowa's Death Certificate.

Iowa is also in the process of evaluating and planning for the electronic death certificate system (usually referred to as Electronic Death Registry, or EDR). If and when this system is implemented, there will be changes in format and there may be changes in the type of information the certifier will be asked to complete.

## **Who can MEs and Death Investigators call if they have questions when filling out a death certificate?**

The staff of the Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner is always available to assist medical examiners and medical examiner investigators with questions on completing the death certificate or determining cause and manner of death. The phone number is 515.725.1400.