

## COMPLETION OF CERTIFICATES OF DEATH

### WHY IMPORTANT:

Since the death certificate differs from other medical records in its purpose and scope, it has been specifically arranged not only to provide a legal document for the family, but also to elicit the type of information required for ascertaining the state's leading causes of death, health status, and other important public health statistics. This makes both the causes listed as well as their positioning on the certificate critical. *(For instance, for public health use, the etiology [or underlying cause] is generally of prime importance, whereas, to the clinician, the particular manifestation requiring care is most important.)*

Another difference between the death certificate and other medical records is that modes of dying (or descriptions of death), such as cardiac or respiratory arrest, shock, heart failure, symptoms and ill-defined terms, should not be used.

The data derived from death certificates provide the basis for many vital health programs and studies. Therefore, it is essential that they contain accurate, consistent, and complete reporting; we are required to query any record that is unclear or incomplete. This is part of a worldwide program, so the information shows not only how different counties and areas in the state compare with other areas, but also how Idaho compares with other states and countries. The data can be used to help identify serious public health problems and/or unusual clusters of diseases, and provide a statistical profile invaluable for studies in health research and prevention. In addition to providing a critical health data resource, the death certificate is both a legal document and a family medical record.

Vital Statistics routinely prepares a variety of data compilations such as leading causes of death, infant deaths by causes, etc., from the vital records filed in this office. These are prepared utilizing the underlying cause of death. In addition to these routine summaries, the Bureau responds to numerous requests for specialized statistical studies and/or analysis each year.

### WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

It is the responsibility of the certifying physician or coroner to provide the cause of death according to his/her best knowledge and medical opinion. If the certifier is not certain of the exact cause of death, it is acceptable to make an educated guess, modified by terms such as "probable," "possible," "suspected," etc. If the manner of death is "natural" but a cause of death cannot be determined and there was no sign of a condition that might cause death, a statement such as "natural causes, etiology unknown" might be used. However, ***this should be used rarely and only as a last resort***; a "probable" or "possible" cause is always preferable to an unknown one. (Note: Perhaps even if an immediate or intermediate cause is unclear, the medical history might indicate an underlying cause.) Also, the intervals requested on the death certificate are not exact intervals, but are the "Approximate Interval Between Onset and Death." Please note too that modes of death should not be listed, and the causes should be described as specifically as possible.