



Cause of Death on the **Death Certificate**

in line with ICD

Quick reference guide

Cause of death information serves

- epidemiology and prevention
- managing health care
- comparing health in different populations

Certification of death is one of the first steps in getting an overview of the health of people.

The diseases or conditions recorded on a death certificate represent the best medical opinion.

A properly completed cause-of-death certificate provides a description of the order, type and association of events that have resulted in the death.

The diagnoses reported on the certificate are coded with the International Classification of Diseases, 10th edition. This coded data is analyzed and used both nationally and internationally no matter what language was used to complete the certification.

Cause of Death on the certificate - how to fill in?

Frame A: Death certificates may look different in most countries. But the section on the cause of death is identical world wide.

Frame A has two parts, called Part 1 and Part 2, and a section to record the time interval between the onset of each condition and the date of death.

Part 1 - is used for diseases or conditions that form part of the **sequence of events** leading directly to death.

The immediate (direct) cause of death is entered on the first line, 1(a).

There must always be an entry on line 1(a).

The entry on line 1a may be the only condition reported in Part I of the certificate.

Where there are **two or more conditions** that form part of the sequence of events leading directly to death, each event in the sequence should be recorded on a separate line.

In any case you must record the disease, injury or external cause that resulted in the death. Do not record the **mode of dying**, such as cardiac arrest, respiratory failure or heart failure.

Try to be as specific as you can. **"Unknown"** cause of death should be recorded in cases where thorough testing or autopsy examination cannot determine a cause of death. "Unknown" is better than any speculation on the possible cause of death.

Always fully spell out all terms. **Abbreviations** can be interpreted in different ways. Terms such as "suspected" or "possible" are ignored in evaluation of the entries. For example "suspected Diabetes" will be interpreted as "Diabetes". The four lines may not provide enough space for the chain of events. Do not waste space with **unnecessary words**. Some clinical terms are very vague. For example, "tumour" does not specify behaviour (see also last page of this flyer).

Duration - is the time interval between the onset of each condition that is entered on the certificate (not the time of diagnosis of the condition), and the date of death. The duration information is useful in coding certain diseases and also provides a useful check on the order of the reported sequence of conditions.

Part 2 - is used for conditions that do not belong in Part 1 but whose presence contributed to death.

Frame B: Some detail is frequently forgotten in Part 1 and 2 (Frame A). Separate detailed questions ask for detail such as previous surgery, mode of death or place of occurrence. Frame B is not shown in this information sheet. It is self-explanatory.

Cause of Death on the certificate - step by step

Start at line 1(a), with the immediate (direct) cause, then go back in time to preceding conditions until you get to the one that started the sequence of events. You will get very close to the time the patient was healthy.

Now, you should have reported the underlying or originating cause on the lowest used line and a sequence of events leads from the underlying cause up to the immediate (direct) cause in the first line 1 (a).

Finally, record the time interval between the onset of each condition entered on the certificate and the date of death. Where the time or date of onset is not known you should record a best estimate. Enter the unit of time (minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years).

Example

Frame A: Medical data: Part 1 and 2			
1 Report disease or condition directly leading to death on line a Report chain of events in due to order (if applicable) State the underlying cause on the lowest used line		Cause of death	Time interval from onset to death
	a	Cerebral haemorrhage	4 hours
	b	Due to: Metastasis of the brain	4 months
	c	Due to: Breast cancer	5 years
	d	Due to:	
2 Other significant conditions contributing to death (time intervals can be included in brackets after the condition)			

- **Write clearly** and do not use abbreviations.
- Be sure the information is **complete**.
- **Do not speculate** on the cause of death.
- Do not fill in laboratory results or statements like "found by partner".
(there may be separate fields on the form for this kind of information)
- **One condition per line** should be sufficient.

Frequently used ill-defined terms

Accident	Specify circumstances Specify intent , as car accident, suicidal, or assault; Specify place of occurrence
Alcohol, drugs	Specify use : long term or single, addiction
Complication of surgery	Specify disease : disease that caused surgery
Dementia	Specify cause : Alzheimer, infarction, old age, other
Hepatitis	Specify course, etiology : acute or chronic, alcoholic If viral : specify Type (A, B, C, ...)
Infarction	Specify site : heart, brain, ... Specify cause : arteriosclerotic, thrombotic, embolic...
Infection	Specify: primary or secondary, causative organism If primary : specify bacterial or viral If secondary : specify the primary infection
Leukaemia	Specify: acute, subacute, chronic lymphatic, myeloid, monocytic
Pneumonia	Specify: primary, aspiration, cause , causative organism If due to immobility : specify the cause of the immobility
Pulmonary embolism	Specify cause : cause of embolism If post-surgical or immobility : specify disease that caused surgery or immobility
Renal failure	Specify: acute, chronic or terminal, underlying cause of insufficiency, such as arteriosclerosis, or infection If due to immobility : specify the cause of the immobility
Thrombosis	Specify: arterial or venous Specify: the blood vessel If post-surgical or immobility : specify disease that caused surgery or immobility
Tumour	Specify: behaviour, location, metastases
Urinary tract infection	Specify: site in the urinary tract, causative organism , underlying cause of infection If due to immobility : specify the cause of the immobility